

# E-Commerce

## Still Faces Uphill Battle

**D**espite sophisticated marketing designed to convince superintendents that electronic commerce is the wave of the future, the message is still struggling to be heard, judging by our Superintendent State of the Industry Survey. The results show that superintendents are split on using the Internet for business purposes. Twenty-eight percent use the Internet daily to conduct business, 25 percent use it weekly, 26 percent use it occasionally, and 21 percent say they never navigate the Web for business purposes.

As for purchasing supplies online, the numbers are more stark, at least in the short term. Forty-two percent of survey respondents said there was "no way" they would

buy any supplies online in the next 12 months, and only 3 percent are currently buying online. That means that e-commerce companies have more convincing to do if they hope to capture a substantial portion of superintendents' business.

One of the hindrances to e-commerce in the industry is a lack of Internet access from some superintendents' offices, says Carlos Vega, superintendent at Vista Hills CC in El Paso, Texas. He says he would buy online, but he's not linked to the Internet.

"That's one of the major barriers that is preventing superintendents from committing to e-commerce," Vega says. "We all have computers, but not all of us are online yet. As more superintendents get hooked up, more e-commerce will take place."

Vega says he plans to be online at his course within the next five months. He plans to purchase spare parts for his machines and chemicals through the Internet.

Bruce Rickert, certified superintendent at Medford CC in Medford, N.J., uses the Internet daily for business purposes and says it's "somewhat likely" that he will pur-

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chase supplies or products online in the next 12 months.

He says he foresees a day when the Internet will replace salespeople. But companies who want Rickert's business can't just send him broadcast e-mails about equipment deals. They must tailor their marketing plans to meet his specific needs, he says.

"Right now, most of the companies aren't customizing their pitches to me," Rickert says. "Companies are going to have to work harder to get information that specifically targets me, and they will have to provide that information

concisely. My time is precious, and the companies that make it easier for me to make online purchases will be more likely to get my business."

Rickert says e-commerce companies also suffer from the fact that they lack a history. He says he's more likely to buy from a Web site that bears the name of an established company rather than a newcomer he knows little about. "I'm leery of doing an online deal with people I don't feel like I know," Rickert says.

Kevin Goolsby, superintendent at Sportsman of Perdido GC in Pensacola, Fla., says he uses the Internet to gather information on products. He also uses e-mail to confer with fellow superintendents before deciding which products to buy. He listed himself as a "very likely" to purchase items through the Web in the next year.

"One drawback to buying items on the Web is that you risk losing contact with expert salespeople," Goolsby says. "That's scary for a lot of people, particularly when you depend on them to help you make a purchasing decision."

But as more golf courses focus attention on bottom-line performance, Goolsby says e-commerce will provide a faster, cheaper way to procure goods and services.

"We all have budgets that we have to stay within," he says. "If buying online will help us do that, then that's where the industry is going to move."

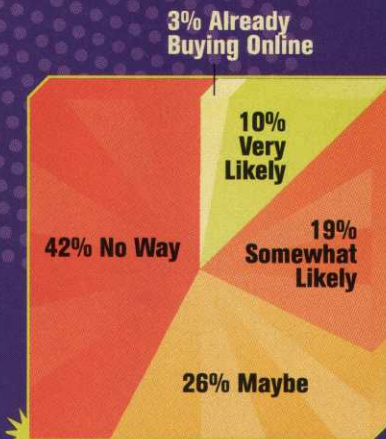
Vega also says he's not sure he'll ever buy equipment like greens mowers and utility vehicles on the Web. "I'll probably still contact my local distributor because I'll still want to see what I'm buying," he adds. ■

— Frank H. Andorka Jr.

### How often do you use the Internet for business purposes?



### How likely are you to buy supplies or products for your facility online in the next 12 months?



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