Users Pulled the Plug On Dot-coms

BY LARRY AYLWARD

To satirize a line from a classic REM song: "It's the end of electronic commerce as the industry knows it ... and superintendents feel fine."

It's obvious that superintendents — and suppliers, for that matter — want little to do with the mode of e-commerce presented to them by third-party Internet companies. Those dot-coms tried desperately to attract superintendents and suppliers to their sites to initiate product sales between them and earn a percentage from the sales in the process.

For many reasons, most superintendents and suppliers spurned the dot-coms because they weren't interested in doing business on computers and through vendors they couldn't see or hear. (*See our cover story on page 24.*)

Hence, many of the dot-coms that sailed into the industry a few years ago — and announced they would change the way the industry does business — have abandoned their e-commerce plans or are steering in new directions. Their creators finally realized they were throwing away money in cyberspace.

Mike Scott, who founded Golfsat in San Diego, headed the industry's most visible e-commerce vendor. Golfsat marketed itself far more aggressively than any of its competitors. But in the end, and $9.5 million later, Scott discovered that most superintendents weren't interested in Golfsat's concept.

I'm not surprised. Many superintendents I've talked with the past few years were unsure about e-commerce from the beginning — mainly because it wasn't top of mind for them.

I also disagree with the proponents who say the third-party dot-coms were ahead of their time. I'm not saying that Scott and the others weren't visionaries, but I doubt the exchange or auction type of e-commerce will ever work in the golf course maintenance industry.

This is not to say that superintendents don't know how to point and click. They possess more than enough technological savvy to surf the Internet and purchase equipment. But the simple fact is they *don't* want to buy online because they don't rank e-commerce high on their priority lists.

Most superintendents have no problems buying equipment from local distributors. So why should they change horses in midstream and buy supplies online?

SUPERINTENDENTS DON'T WANT TO BUY ONLINE BECAUSE THEY DON'T RANK E-COMMERCE HIGH ON THEIR PRIORITY LISTS

Most superintendents believe there's nothing wrong with the current buying system, and e-commerce doesn't offer them enough good reasons to change.

E-commerce is also too impersonal for superintendents, most of whom value the personal relationships they have with their distributors. In many cases, the two are friends.

It's mind-boggling to think there were at least 10 e-commerce hawkers two years ago vying to do business with superintendents and suppliers. It's mind-boggling because superintendents and suppliers never asked for their services. What happened to the simple business concept of supply and demand?

In essence, the industry's dot-coms jumped on the Internet bandwagon while it was rolling merrily along — but they couldn't get off before the wagon's wheels fell off.

Because there were so many of them, the dot-coms might have ruined any chance of success a few of them might have had. I don't know about you, but I was in a dot fog trying to keep up with their names, offerings and Web site addresses. It was like going to an Italian restaurant and studying a menu offering 12 different varieties of pasta and meat sauce. You became so frustrated about which one to order that you walked out of the restaurant in a huff.

The bottom line is that superintendents have too many more pressing concerns — it's 100 degrees and the irrigation pump is on the fritz — to think about whether they want to try e-commerce. Here's betting a distributor-delivered case of fungicide that it will always be that way.

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