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Applying a technology makeover will open your business to more customers

By Sonya A. Donaldson

IT'S 3 A.M. IN HOUSTON. WHILE the rest of the city sleeps, it's crunch time for Randy Diggs. The founder and CEO of Mo Better Meat Co. Inc. and his early morning crew are hard at work putting together meat packages for thousands of customers.

The crew must pack and repack the meat in boxes to get them ready for shipping. The trucks have to be loaded by 6 a.m. As the deadline looms, the pace quickens. At 9 a.m., the drivers arrive. "From there, it's a madhouse for two hours, because we are trying to get out 52 trucks without any problems," says Diggs. Fortunately for his customers, Diggs has found a way to streamline the process—with a little help from technology, of course.

In competitive markets, small firms are looking for new ways to become more efficient and increase profits. As technology is becoming less expensive and more widely integrated, the opportunities for small businesses are enormous. Many companies are finding that they no longer need to look and sound, well, small. Technology is providing them with a relatively inexpensive means of communicating with customers, improving efficiency and improving their bottom line. Better yet, small businesses have discovered what really sells customers on their products and services—simplicity. From streamlined order processing to easy-to-use Web tools, more and more African American businesses are heeding technology's call. **BLACKENTERPRISE** tracked down two small businesses that underwent a technology makeover to help expand their customer base and sail smoothly over the choppy waters of commerce.

ALL THE RIGHT MOVES

Mo Better Meat (www.mobettermeats.com), launched in 1991, delivers precooked meats and other preprepared food items to clients throughout Texas, primarily in the Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio areas. The company must deliver the mostly perishable items on time or risk losing customers. Mo Better Meat, which posted revenues of \$9 million in 2004, recently started online order processing, and with Diggs's increasingly busy schedule, the company needed a way to streamline communications between the warehouse, trucks, and its 100,000 customers.

The right technology can take your business from everyday to extraordinary. With 130 employees, 52 trucks, and a 10,000-square-foot warehouse, Diggs found that the old paper-and-spreadsheet method he had been using could no longer efficiently handle the day-to-day operations of his growing company. With thousands of customer orders to receive, process, track, and deliver, and his company's addition of online shopping, Diggs needed tools that would allow him to run his business



A TECHNOLOGY UPGRADE HELPED DIGGS STREAMLINE HIS DELIVERY PROCESS.

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from anywhere. So he turned to NetSuite (www.netsuite.com), a provider of Web-based business applications for small and midsize businesses.

NetSuite's software handles everything from sales and contact management to file sharing, order processing, accounting, inventory, product shipment, employee records, and e-commerce activities. The integrated system allows companies to manage operations through an Internet connection or browser from the office as well as from remote locations. Users interact with a real-time dashboard—a customized view that provides accurate and current company information.

Diggs says he turned to NetSuite because he had tried other applications without success. "We had outgrown QuickBooks, and we had tried Peachtree, MAS 200, and lots of other [software], but NetSuite was a good fit for us," he says. "Dealing with Excel and other applications was just too much work. I travel a lot, and with NetSuite I can log on and see what's ▶



WATSON LAUNCHED A NEW WEBSITE TO SHOWCASE HIS ARTWORK

going on, and that helps me make better decisions.” Diggs, 39, admits that his CFO Layne McClanahan, handled the bulk of the work, single-handedly implementing the program with just a few hiccups along the way.

“Randy started with Excel,” says McClanahan, explaining the switch. “Before that it was just a big cheap tablet, just writing it down.” What sold Mo Better Meats on NetSuite? McClanahan sums it up: “One, is that the volume Randy is doing can’t be handled efficiently with canned software. Two, he is geographically located in many areas and [NetSuite] gives us the ability to get everyone in one place at the same time. And Randy can run it whether he is in his house in Dallas or in Seattle.”

“We initially ran into some problems because of the way we operate,” says Diggs. “So they helped us personalize the software to fit our business needs.” NetSuite provides hosted solutions to its clients, but it limits the number of inventory warehouse locations to 50, according to Scott Thomas, senior account manager at NetSuite, who worked with Diggs on implementation. Mo Better Meat, which designates each of its delivery trucks as a warehouse, “maxed out on inventory locations” because the company owns more than 50 trucks. NetSuite simply customized the application by using a different category class that required less detailed information and better fit the company’s needs.

“At the end of 2005, we will have at least 100 locations,” adds McClanahan. Will NetSuite be enough to meet the needs of this fast-growing company? Not a problem, McClanahan says, “When we first got into this, we were able to work around a lot of things. We have as many classes as we need.” Implementing NetSuite cost the company between \$25,000 and \$30,000, plus \$99 per user per month, with one free seat for the certified public accountant. The company purchased 12 user licenses.

The application also integrates with Mo Better Meats’ latest venture—online ordering. Providing seamless interaction between

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several processes was important for Mo Better Meat, particularly since the company wanted to launch an e-commerce Website that allows customers to access its store 24 hours a day. According to Diggs, 90% of first-order customers become regular clients, getting a variety of meat and grocery products delivered to their doors. Now, customers can simply log on and order. Orders are processed via PayPal, a popular online payment system used by e-commerce vendors. “We started online ordering because there were a lot of people out of town who wanted our service, and these were places we had not gone yet,” says Diggs.

The company is well on its way to posting \$12 million in revenues for 2005, says Diggs. It’s a huge return on his investment of \$100 in meat and \$1,200 on a Chevy cargo van he purchased at auction back in 1990.

ART CAN BE BIG BUSINESS

Although Joseph Watson has no intention of quitting his day job just yet, his burgeoning part-time business could cause him to reconsider. Watson, 32, works as a commercial designer but studied illustration and painting at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. When he began looking for an alternative to lugging his portfolio from client to client, he says the Internet was his first and logical choice to maximize exposure.

“Before the Websites, I used to go to the different studios and companies to show my portfolio,” he says. Watson says his Websites have put an end to this time-consuming task. “Most of the ►

[10] tips for getting your business in gear with technology

For many small businesses, getting up to speed with technology might seem an expensive and time-intensive task. But choosing the right tools for your business is a lot easier than it used to be. Here are just a few:

[1. TAKE IT TO THE WEB.] Build a robust Website to communicate what your business does. Today, having a Website for your small business is a no-brainer. Your biggest problem will be deciding which company to use. Your best bet? Ask a colleague whose opinion you value.

[2. MAKE IT ELECTRONIC.] Use electronic billing and payments to accelerate timing of receipts and payments. Online payment processing such as PayPal (www.paypal.com; transaction fees start at 2.9% plus 30 cents) and business-processing tools such as QuickBooks Online Edition (www.quickbooksonline.com; starting at \$19.95 per month) let you easily manage customer relationships.

[3. CREATE AN ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTER.] Newsletters are an easy and efficient way to add value to your business by keeping customers informed and interested in your products or services.

[4. GO BACK TO SCHOOL.] Use electronic learning tools, i.e., Webinars, as a vehicle for professional devel-

opment. A good Web host will offer small businesses the opportunity to add such features at a nominal cost as their business grows.

[5. GIVE THEM A HAND.] Consider incorporating wireless technology, especially the new generation of handheld devices, to improve efficiency and responsiveness. Some good choices include the Blackberry 7100 series (www.blackberry.com; starting at \$199) and the Handspring Treo 650 (www.handspring.com; starting at \$299), which incorporate phone and PDA functionality in one small device.

[6. KEEP TRACK.] Small businesses can take advantage of automated online tracking and distribution services from UPS (www.ups.com), FedEx (www.fedex.com), and the U.S. Postal Service (www.usps.com). UPS's WorldShip program, for example, integrates with a company's order processing and works seamlessly with QuickBooks, Yahoo! Merchant, and other programs.

[7. LINK UP.] Sure, you already have a Website that complements your brick-and-mortar operation, but consider linking your site to a larger company such as eBay or Amazon.com. As an affiliate, you'll enjoy the benefits of an expanded customer base and automated payment processing to smooth the way.

[8. MR. TELEPHONE MAN.] Internet telephony or Voice Over Internet Protocol is alive and kicking (and better than ever). While there is a cost for this Internet service, using VoIP offers significant savings on your phone bill. Consider services such as Net2Phone or interactive voice response solutions such as Angel.com (starting at \$39.99 per month). GotVMail's VirtualOne (www.gotvmail.com; starting at \$9.95 per month) offers small businesses a virtual PBX system, or call center system, which combines a unique toll free and local number with multiple mailboxes/extensions, call forwarding, music-on-hold, dial-by-name directory, and other advanced features.

[9. OPEN A MERCHANT ACCOUNT.] Companies such as Visa and American Express offer small business accounts and services that help companies manage expenses. For example, Visa offers VIS Select (usa.visa.com/business), a reporting and analysis tool for business customers. And American Express offers Open for Business (home.americanexpress.com/home/open.shtml), which features online account analysis and management tools.

[10. LEAVE IT TO THE PROS.] Unless you are a seasoned Website designer, your best bet is to leave the nuts and bolts of a hosted site to the professionals. Do the research to find a host that matches your needs—service, availability, and price.

people who view my online portfolio are in a different state or perhaps a different country. I don't even know what most of my clients look like," he says.

Watson launched Hyena-Empire Studio Inc. (www.hyena-empire.com) in 2001 initially as a way of displaying his work to a wider audience of potential clients. But with Aplus.Net (www.aplus.net), a Website-development and hosting service, the site has evolved and continues to change to reflect the needs of his clients and visitors. Hyena-Empire is a studio Website that specializes in graphic design, logos, films, toys, and character development of video games and more. Watson had

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previously worked with Midway Games, designing for video game systems such as Microsoft's Xbox and Sony's PlayStation. He launched a second Website, Joseph Watson Collection ▶

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(www.josephwatsoncollection.com), in 2004 as an online portfolio for his more traditional work, which focuses on interior décor and fine art paintings.

"Since I'm an artist, the usual way of getting work is to show your portfolio," says Watson. "The idea of actually getting your work seen or marketed while you're sleeping appealed to me. [The Internet] gives you wider exposure. He chose Aplus.Net because a friend recommended it. "He had used them before and was really happy with them. The price was right, too, at the time, and the service was top-notch," he says.

**"By being really clever, having a good design and smart marketing, and a service like Aplus.Net, a small guy can look like a major company."
—Joseph Watson**

Still, Watson was cautious: "I was on a really tight budget. Every dollar had to count. But I knew that I needed to get worldwide exposure in order for everyone to see my work and see how my logo and design service could benefit their businesses." Watson says that even though Aplus.Net came highly recommended, he was still wary. "I was really cautious at first because I never had a real Website before. For an artist, good site design is crucial.

According to Watson, launching Hyena-Empire was no easy feat for someone holding down a full-time design job. "I worked overtime and scrambled at night and weekends to get the Website launched," he says, adding that the results were worth the hard work. "The benefits include a national list of clients, worldwide exposure, extra income, security, fan mail, and pride. It's great when I turn on my PDA and retrieve e-mails from potential clients that have just finished checking out the site.

Watson adds that setting up the site was more of a collaborative effort. He and his friend worked on a preliminary version of the Hyena-Empire site before turning it over to Aplus.Net. "[Aplus.Net] did a lot of the HTML and getting it to work. And I like to do a lot of my own

designs," he says. Aplus.Net also designed Flash intros for the sites. Watson invested almost \$1,000 to launch Hyena-Empire's Website and pays \$9.95 per month. For the Joseph Watson Collection, he invested a total of \$950 in design and setup and pays \$34.95 per month for hosting services. He chose not to link the sites, he says, because he wanted the sites to work independently and be successful on their own.

In addition to showcasing Watson's artwork, Hyena-Empire also provides tutorials for art students to demonstrate how he develops a character. "This year I decided to make it more service-based, so companies can see why they should use my service. I am also updating the site by showing my logo process, my secret recipe for how I design logos."

Watson says he frequently gets job offers, requests for advice from students, and e-mails from artists looking to subcontract. He recently began subcontracting work to manage overflow. One of his tutorials, for example, shows site visitors how to design a character, and he is working on a series of tutorials featuring his design style. "Eventually I'd like to move into [using] a Flash-based tutorial, streaming video, or a video demo, something that people can download," he adds. Watson incorporates PayPal into his site to make the payment process seamless. And he set up a password-protected FTP site for clients to access their jobs.

For this part-time entrepreneur, business is booming. Six of his designs from the Décor Aquatica series displayed on the Joseph Watson Collection Website have been selected by Pacifica Tile Art (www.pacificatileart.com) and are featured in Pacifica's offerings to restaurants and other businesses. "[The site] also got me several exhibits," he adds.

Watson is now gearing up to launch the e-commerce portion of Hyena-Empire, offering a line of sketchbooks, T-shirts, and other products. This year, he projects revenues of \$100,000 for his evening-and-weekend enterprise. Watson adds that because working with Aplus.Net has been so problem-free, his business can look like a design firm almost effortlessly. "By being really clever, having a good design and smart marketing, and a service like Aplus.Net, a small guy can look like a major company."