To Push or Not to Push

By Contributing Editor Pecenik Miran
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In the last two years he has published many articles about the Web on italian and canadian newspapers and his work was mentioned in dozens of articles on financial and Internet magazines, on television and on an italian national teletext. Overall he increased the popularity of the bank with over 700 links all around the world.

He has spoken in various meetings, organised by the principal italian banking corporates, such Abi, Ipacri and Istinform. In 1996 he worked on a questionnaire of the use of Internet in Italy (nowadays the biggest in Italy, with 1700 answers) and had organised the first italian elections on the Web. In 1997 he tested the push technology with a group of 700 people.

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Translation by Michele Clara

During the summer of last year I participated to the design of a questionnaire on the use of the Web in Italy together with Giovanni Montana, a student at the University of Palermo. To stimulate participation, I launched Netzapping, a free-of-charge service whereby the latest news on a range of selected topics were delivered by e-mail. Whoever completed the questionnaire was granted the opportunity to select ten topics/sites of interest within a pre-set range. Netzapping was activated in November and lasted for nine months. 778 people (from whom we didn't collect personal details) participated to this experiment. They belonged to the most different categories of Internet users ranging from university students to webmasters, from professionals to senior personnel in the banking and computer industry.

In a nutshell, and under the constrain of the available tools, we started to test the so-called Push technology (it is not me browsing the Web, but the Net that comes to my computer, directly and promptly, providing me with what is new and interesting). In order to have some fresh material to work on, I started to monitor around one hundred pages that I considered to be of general interest. Whenever these pages were modified, I would compare them with the previous versions: when I considered the changes to be significant, I would e-mail the users on that specific mailing list. During eight months of monitoring I sent around 225 e-mails, for a total of around 42,000 messages to 651 people. A massive work, but in principle a relatively simple one.

The first problems emerged with regard to e-mail addresses. Around 15 of the e-mails announcing the start of the service bounced back ("user unknown", "the server could not be reached", etc.). Over the following six months a number of users changed their username (including firms and banks with nation-wide relevance). The causes for this event have been twofold. On the one hand, promotional accounts expired, and/or access rights were withdrawn (as in the case of university students). On the other hand, corporate users realised the importance of a domain of their own, and therefore ceased to rely on that of their Internet access provider.

The analysis of the complaints I received can also be instructive. My messages were standardised, without any attachment, and they announced somewhat informally a significant piece of news (among these I would quote the message sent to 257 people on January 17th concerning the release of Office 97 few hours after Microsoft had announced it officially). When the message was of a more commercial nature, some users criticised this form of "advertisement", asking for their name to be withdrawn from the mailing list. Some users replied immediately to my

first message, and asked me to be deleted, for fear that the whole service would prove nothing but a new form of advertisement.

This experience should lead us to ask if the current direction of Push technology is the right one, and if the mass of users will follow it. The availability of "channels" to grab a portion of the needed site may be useful for tele-work, but it is probably insufficient to satisfy the demands for learning and novelty that people are currently expressing through the Net. If these tools will prove themselves nothing but a channel for new forms of advertisement, they will never reach the majority of users. One would seriously risk to see banners like "Push technology? No, thanks!" or "This site is protected from push technology" very much as it happens frequently in our houses, where they are aimed to be the last defence against the bulk of paper adverts that are distributed on a daily basis through the mail.

From my experience as a Webmaster at the bank I learned that it is far better to give users what they desire most strongly, namely pieces of news they consider to be relevant and novel, rather than what a potential supplier would like them to think to be relevant and novel. The success of any Web site, as a means of marketing and in terms of visitors, depends crucially on this decision.

It is certainly very good to use push-technology within the enterprise to ensure that employees do not spend their time browsing "irrelevant" sites, or as a channel to upgrade software applications; I would exclude its use as an advertisement device. The need remain for a human filter to select, with relevant knowledge, what news should be passed on to users; a need that is even stronger when subscribers are asked to pay for the service.

Concerning the tool to be used, I think that the most promising one is the e-mail, at least at the moment and at least in Italy, where "information superhighways" are still largely missing (waiting for Internet II?). As these technical details are solved, it may be possible to send entire hypertextual pages (consisting of html archives, graphs and Java applets), but the need will nevertheless remain for some kind of filters.

To conclude, this experience convinced me that it is not so much the way information are transmitted that attracts the final user, but rather the content of the information being sent. Reading the specialised press, I have yet to find articles that give a sufficient emphasis to this issue: everybody seems to be speaking about the need to restructure the cache, or to integrate the browser and the operating system, or about the way news-providers (and many others) will be willing to pay to access these "channels". Personally I believe that this is not the right approach; nowadays more than ever, what is crucial is the content and the value-added that is being provided to the users, with an eye to the entire audience available (has anyone ever tried to design his or her pages for the average user, and not just the professional one?).

As the SET standard for the security of financial transactions is being finalised, with the development of Internet markets for small-scale exchanges and the diffusion of Internet among users who are willing and able to pay for the services they receive, the wrong approach to this technology (which is by the way far from being a technology yet) would be dangerous. Wise U-turn may be feasible for Bill Gates, but not for many others.