

eCommerce Case Study

Farmyard Nurseries.

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Introduction

This case study has resulted from the WIRECOM project <http://www.wirecom.org.uk> in which the eCommerce Innovation Centre (eCIC) <http://www.ecommerce.ac.uk> at Cardiff University, provided the expert support. Funded by the European Commission's Interreg Programme and run in conjunction with partners in West Wales and SE Ireland, the project provided support for SMEs in their adoption and implementation of e-Commerce. A number of local exemplars were identified whose experience was seen as being beneficial to other SMEs. Farmyard Nurseries from Llandysul in West Wales was one such company.

For a clearer understanding of the project and to clarify comments made in the case study, readers should visit the project Web site at:

<http://www.ecommerce.ac.uk/wirecom/index.html>

Overview

Farmyard Nurseries grow a number of specialist plants and in order to expand, needed to develop their customer base and reach customers outside of their local catchment area. Their pragmatic use of eCommerce has been based on the use of an informative web site supported by electronic mail. Use of eCommerce has brought both direct and indirect benefits but this has only been achieved by putting considerable effort into the proactive marketing of their web site.

The use of eCommerce has not been without problems as the case study will illustrate. Many other SMEs will be faced with the difficulty of finding the time and skills to keep their web site up to date and to maximise the potential opportunities that arise.

The case study not only highlights the benefits and achievements of Farmyard Nurseries but details many of the steps taken to achieve the success. All quotes are from Richard Bramley, owner of Farmyard Nurseries.

“eCommerce and in particular the internet is seen by many SMEs in West Wales to be something which is just not applicable. It is too much of an unknown. I am convinced that long term the WWW will become an accepted marketing tool at an affordable cost and will bring far greater benefits for SMEs than can be achieved via traditional marketing means”

The nursery pre - commerce

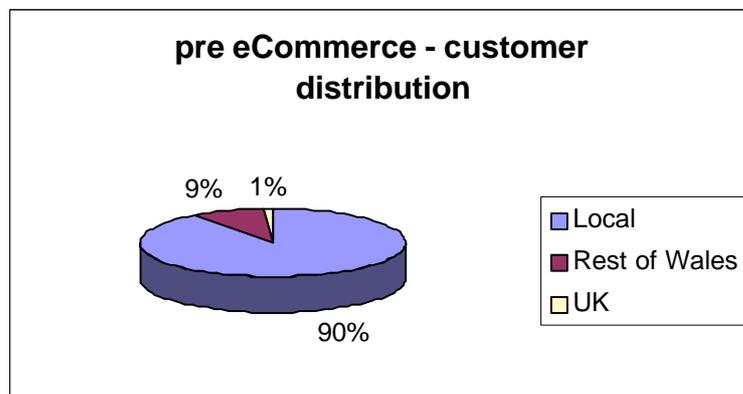
The eCommerce case study begins in early 1999. Farmyard Nurseries (FN) is a plant nursery selling direct to end customers rather than the horticultural trade. Whilst it sells a wide variety of plants, shrubs and trees, the company also grows a range of more unusual herbaceous plants. In addition to the nursery in Llandysul, West Wales, there is a retail outlet in Carmarthen, but it is the potential for eCommerce to support the marketing and sale of the unusual plants from the nursery which was central to their initial interest in eCommerce.

When the early interest in eCommerce began, the company had an annual turnover of approximately £0.25m and staffing levels were very seasonal. There was a

permanent staff of 8 but during the spring and summer months 6 additional staff were employed.

Unlike typical garden centres which are nothing more than retail outlets, FN considered themselves as a producer, propagating and growing tens of thousands of plants a year. They had a plant growing area of approximately 2.5 acres which included 24 growing tunnels or greenhouses. Like so many small companies in rural West Wales, they had traditionally sold their products to a relatively local customer base.

The company was relatively well-known for four groups of plants. These were hellebores, a wide range of unusual herbaceous plants, a group of lilies know as tricyrtis or toad lilies and finally schizostylis or kaffir lilies. Whilst local people did buy such plants, the main market were the more experienced and specialist gardeners, found in greater numbers in other parts of the UK but also in other countries. This was the market FN were keen to attract.



Traditional Marketing

The nursery used a number of traditional marketing tools. They were registered for their specialist plants in the Royal Horticultural Society's National Plant Finder index – the gospel for anyone wanting to find particular specialist plants. They also used local Yellow Pages but distance frequently ruled out customer interest even when their hellebore specialism was mentioned in national gardening magazines such as "Gardeners World".

Business issues

It was at this point, through the WIRECOM project, that Richard Bramely became aware of eCIC and its approach to using eCommerce within SMEs which was driven by business need rather than technology.

Whilst Richard Bramley's interest in the potential of the WWW was obvious from the start, a number of important business issues were identified which it was felt eCommerce could address. The company had a regular call for standard plants and shrubs from the Llandysul and Carmarthen area. However if they wanted to expand their sales of specialist plants they needed to reach a larger market in a wider area. Using the traditional marketing methods was difficult and expensive. Producing a printed brochure was not only time consuming and expensive, it soon became out of date and was expensive to distribute as was the purchase of mailing lists. To the specialist hellebore collector, accurate information on the available colours and shape of flower was a major consideration and it would be difficult to describe flowers and colours without use of a photograph. Making quality and timely information available was another business issue which had to be addressed.



Hellebore orientalis

A further consideration was providing a means of physically getting plants to customers who could not visit the nursery due to its geographic location. The nursery already had a successful mail order facility in place and this was extended to cover new business generated from the web. Having such a delivery mechanism in place which could distribute relatively large, mature plants was important in supporting their use of the eCommerce.

The nursery wanted to demonstrate it had an effective communications system. Phone and fax were the traditional means but there needed to be a means by which the type of gardener which they hoped to attract, the modern gardener who increasingly had a computer at home linked to the Internet, could contact them any time of the day or night.



Mail order was seen as an important service to offer customers.

When considering the potential eCommerce applications which might be used, the conclusion was quickly reached that of all the available technologies the internet, especially e-mail and the world wide web (WWW), were the ones with the greatest opportunity. They offered the potential to place information regarding FN's specialist plants before a world-wide audience at a relatively low costs. Whilst selling plants world-wide would seem an unlikely scenario, the WWW has certainly brought together a community of Internet gardeners – FN's potential customers. Many exchanged information with other gardeners and WWW gardening sites around the world and it was not unknown for a UK gardener to find a source of UK specialist plants from an American site. Establishing and maintaining contact with such people required the use of e-mail.

Having narrowed down the technology options the next question was whether there was a match between the areas of the business being considered i.e. the specialist plants, and the potential users of the WWW. This was an important consideration. In too many cases enthusiastic companies build Web sites only to find few visitors. With FN, a web search identified the expanding interest in gardening and gardens on the web. Certainly in early 1999 the major interest was in North America but there was ample evidence that the interest was growing in the UK and Europe. This initial observation has proved to be correct as the last two years has seen a mushrooming of gardening and related sites appearing in the UK.

There were garden sites, gardening organisations, discussion groups and forums for gardeners, on-line gardening as well as garden centres and nurseries advertising their products. Whilst it was still early days and the UK was seen as being 2 years behind the American, it was considered that there was a potential match between FN, it's specialist plants and internet users. Now was the time to undertake development work and be one of the first in the UK using this method of product marketing.

Use of Information and Communications Technology

FN could not be called technologically advanced but it has to be said that computers were used to run several parts of the business. A basic 486 PC was used simply to print labels from a plant database and a Pentium 90 for the business accounts.

FN also bought a Pentium 200 PC simply to link to the Internet via a dial-up modem and standard telephone line. Before working with eCIC, Richard had taken a subscription to British Telecom's Internet service costing approximately £12.00 per month. It was via this basic service and using the space allocated to each user for hosting Web pages, that Richard developed his first 6 page web site. He had a feeling that for his specialist sales, eCommerce offered him the potential to reach a much wider audience and this simple low cost investment might lead to greater things.

He developed the first pages using a Web page creation tool and whilst the site didn't generate much interest, it convinced Richard that this was something he should consider further. It was through the WIRECOM project and the links established with eCIC that this initial interest was developed further.

FN's use of eCommerce

To Richard Bramley eCommerce was not about selling from a web site but rather making use of various internet based solutions to improve the marketing of his company and communications with customers. He didn't feel that the gardening community was ready to buy on-line but the technology, especially a web site, offered significant benefits.

The World Wide Web

Having decided to make better use of the web than he achieved through his initial site, Richard addressed the issue of what should be on the site, how it should be structured and who could develop the material. Looking at many of the sites which were currently available in the gardening sector, Richard was convinced that content and layout were important issues. Too many companies used the latest techniques but this frequently resulted in an over complex site with the effort being placed on using technology rather than the content.

Richard was made aware by eCIC that he had to cater for visits from two types of visitors, humans and computers and the needs of both were very different. The new FN site had to be easy to use, contain material which would attract people back time and again, which they would want to tell their friends about and at the same time have content which search engines would award a high relevance ranking.

In simple terms the idea was to set up a number of pages which described a range of key areas which were to be marketed via the WWW.

- a "home" page which contained an overview of the site and links to the other sections;
- information of the various plants that would be marketed via the Web;
- details on the mail order facility;
- information on how to request an electronic catalogue;
- details on how the nursery could be found for those that wanted to visit;

- contact details from e-mail through to phone;
- information on any special offers or interesting developments at the nursery.

Although Richard had developed his first few trial pages, he didn't see himself as a web page author nor did he feel he had the time to learn such skills. However, the web was still something of an experiment and he didn't want to spend several hundreds or even a thousand pounds for the services of a professional web page developer. He took the route of many small local companies and came to an arrangement with a 6th form pupil at a local college who offered to develop the site based on information Richard provided. This did not prove to be a success. The work was getting done in spare time and conflicted with other commitments. The pages which were developed included the latest developments with Java script, frames and floating menus. It just did not reflect the image that the nursery wanted to portray and as the time had rolled on and the nursery was less rushed, Richard made the decision to take on the role of web page development himself.

He made use of AOL Press, a typical page development tool available free from the Internet which hides the complexity of web page design from the author. He also visited various web sites looking at what he thought were good points and what to avoid. A number of decisions were reached about his pages. They would be simple, with no frames and not many levels of information to work through. Images were important but so was the speed of download. Richard had come across the concept of small images or thumbnails which allowed a small version of the image to be downloaded which could then be used to subsequently download larger versions of individual pictures. This seemed ideal for photographs of plants.

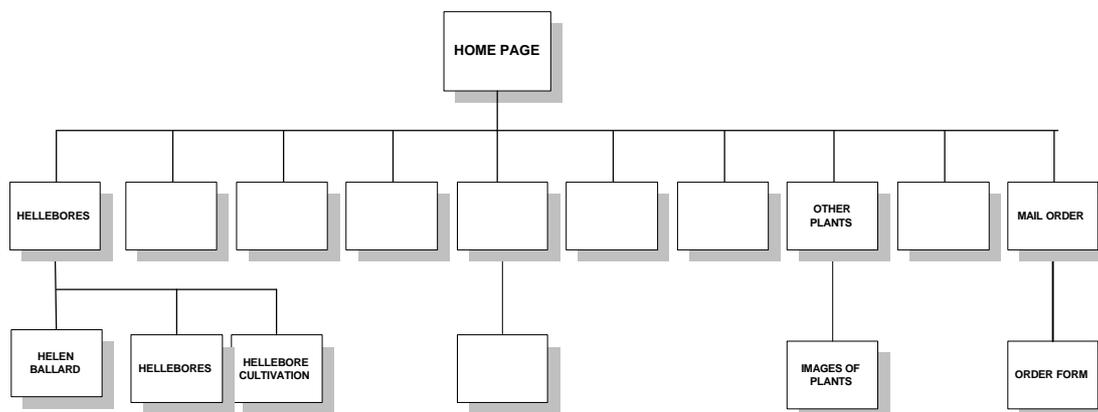


Figure 1 – relationship of Web pages showing flat structure

Having drafted out a framework for the various pages and their relationship with each other i.e. the hypertext links within the site, Richard started to create the content. Whilst much of the site related to the range of plants which were available, there was considerable "added value content". This related to such areas as advice on hellebore propagation and information on national plant collections held at the nursery. Such content attracts visitors and also encourages incoming hypertext links.

Initially he thought about using the material from existing catalogues and marketing material but soon realised that this was dated and didn't present the image he wanted for the Internet.

How long did the development take?

Richard estimates it took him 10 working days to develop the initial site. Much of this time was spent developing new skills and a professional web page developer would have taken much less time. The work was done in the evenings or sometimes a couple of hours snatched on a particularly wet day when no outside work was possible. He achieved his initial target date although it took another two weeks to sort out problems and revise page content. Richard was able to use digital images of many of his plants as he already had a digital camera and could load the images directly into the web pages.

Having satisfied himself on the quality of the pages, Richard was able to upload all the pages and accompanying images to the server and check that all the hypertext links worked both within the site and externally. A phone call to BTInternet provided him with all the information he needed to be able to do this. They pointed him to the source of suitable software (CUTEFTP) which he was able to download free from the Internet. Once loaded, he used the software to transfer the pages to the appropriate location on the BT server. All pages were uploaded together and the same software is used to upload any amendments or new pages.

At this point many companies are happy – they have a Web site and the world will soon start beating a path to their door!! For FN this was only the end of the development phase and the start of the promotion activities.

Promotion of the Web site.

Discussions with eCIC had brought home to Richard the importance of marketing a web site. Leaving the pages to sit in splendid isolation on a server did not usually attract many visitors. Richard had found sites with visitor counters indicating that they had had something like 256 visitors since January 1999 and most of them would have been the site developer or his family!!

Improving the Web pages

Richard then spent time with eCIC discussing the various options available to bring more people to his site. At the Web page level, considerable thought was given to the “hidden text” on pages which has a dramatic impact on the potential for a Web site to be found by search engines. Within the html code for each page is a facility to include a meaningful page title. This should contain one or more words which convey key information relating to the contents of the page. For FN, the initial title on each page included the name of the nursery, a brief description of what is provided and a word describing the content of that individual page, for example “index” or “hellebores”. It is this title which is displayed on search engine results.

There is also a facility for including keywords or phrases which people interested in the type of product the nursery sold might enter into a search engine. This list of



One of the many hellebore tunnels at Farmyard Nurseries

keywords was built up over a number of days and entered into each of the pages. Better results are usually achieved by using key phrases or collections of words rather than individual words.

Not only are the title and keywords important but also the content of the pages. Too many sites have a collection of images as their home page. Search engines don't understand images and so the relevance rating given to a page is lower, even if a key word is in the title or keyword tag. It is important that each page contains text which includes a number of the keywords. Even if images are used, they should be given a name using the alt tag facility (a facility for using a name as an alternative to an image) so that this can at least be read by a search engine. It was also noticed that search engines did not like frames (a feature which allows web designers to segment the window of a web browser into distinct sections) and found difficulty navigating such sites. With the titles, keywords and page description in place, the question of registering a site with a search engine was addressed.

Registering with Search Engines

Something like 10 search engines were selected including such names as Alta Vista, HotBot, MSN, Excite as well as a number of UK specific search engines. The original idea was to register the home page with each of the search engines and let them use their own referencing software (known as spiders) to follow the hypertext links within a site and thus register all of the different pages. Search engines work in different ways and use different criteria and this case study cannot go into the idiosyncrasies of each. It is important to go through the registering process if you are serious about using your web site as a marketing tool.

The registration facility for each of the search engines is relatively easy to follow, although the registration pages for directory based services like Yahoo were more time consuming to complete.

The result of the search engine registration was that the company found itself listed on page two of an Alta Vista search for one of their key words “hellebores” out of a listing of nearly 700 such sites. This wasn't too bad , it was certainly better than had been achieved in Richard's first dabble with a web site when no key words or titles were included but other key word searches were not finding the FN Web site. Success with other search engines was varied although the time it took for some engines to register new sites extended into many weeks and some indicated they were not taking any more registrations such was their backlog.

Proactive marketing

Whilst the inclusion of keywords and appropriate titles was important, Richard also learnt from his contact with eCIC of the importance of going out to the gardening world and telling them that the site existed. This was a time consuming and at times repetitive exercise but one which had to be done. Using general gardening related keywords and also those he hoped people would use to find his site, he found several hundred sites and collected contact e-mail addresses. Some sites were obviously in competition and he did not want to make contact. However, there were others which seemed like competition but which had as part of their Web strategy, a good set of links to other sites which acted as an attraction for visitors to come back time and again.

He informed as many people as possible by email that his site existed and suggested they should visit. He did not make the e-mail a sales pitch, rather an informative message pointing them to his site. He was more successful with organisations and individuals rather than companies and there were many private individuals who were both interested in gardening and also had developed their own Web sites. Where appropriate a request was made to set up a hypertext link to the nursery site.

Richard concentrated on the UK but then extended his activities to look at overseas sites, mostly in North America, Australia and New Zealand. Whilst he didn't think he could sell into this arena, he was aware that because of the limited number of good UK gardening sites, many interested UK gardeners visited American sites or exchanged information with American gardeners.

The combination of key words, titles, search engine registration and proactive marketing brought results within two weeks. Nothing major, but it certainly convinced Richard that the web did have a role. He received e-mails from around the world congratulating him on the quality and content of his site and offering to set up links. Orders then appeared and within two weeks he had received two e-mail orders from Germany worth about £100 each. He also had people visit the nursery from the Midlands and London who left with their cars full of hellebores. The news began to spread within the internet gardening community as visitors recommended other contacts to visit the site.

Better results on Search Engines

Whilst this was good news and encouraging for Richard, the inability to find a greater reference to the FN site on search engines and the fact that the site when found was never on the first page of results, caused concern. Working with eCIC Richard looked at ways of bringing about improved search results.

Examining the sites which were ranked higher than his and the search strategies for key search engines resulted in a number of small but potentially important changes being made. The position of the key words in the page title were changed so that the key word or words were at the beginning of the title. In respect of the hellebore page the original title was "Farmyard Nurseries: plants for the discerning gardener including hellebores and unusual herbaceous plants: hellebores" Whilst at the time this seemed a correct title, it included key words and provided a summary of what was on the site it was not focused enough. The new title was "hellebores, hellebore orientalis, helleborus".

A decision was also made to set up what are known as focus pages. These related to the key areas or groups of plants that FN wanted to promote. In particular hellebores, unusual herbaceous plants, tricyrtis and schizostylis. The page content remained basically the same but new, focused titles were added and the key words and other meta tags (which provide information about a web page but which are not displayed) only related to the subject matter on the page and were not the general ones that had been used before. It was also noticed that sites with a hypertext link in the page which somehow made use of the prime keyword of the page in the hypertext description, helped in the matching ratings. This resulted in having to develop one additional page but only took 15 minutes to do.

```
<HEAD>
<TITLE>Helleborus, single and double, wide colour range</TITLE>
<META NAME="description" CONTENT="helleborus, hellebores, helleborus orientalis">
<META NAME="keywords" CONTENT="helleborus, hellebores, hellebore, christmas rose, lenten rose, winter flowering, winter garden, hellebore orientalis, herbaceous plants, double hellebores, toad lilies, kaffir lilies, Helen Ballard">
</HEAD>
```

Examples of meta tag content from a web page

Having revised the pages and made changes to include the focus page concept which took Richard a couple of hours, the search engines were revisited and the individual focus pages registered with the same search engines. The registration process took about 2 hours and it was interesting that even during the three weeks since the home page was initially registered, the method of registration had changed for some engines

The results of the introduction of focus pages brought immediate results with at least one search engine and others soon followed. On Alta Vista FN found that they were on the first page listing for all their key areas, typically in the first four slots and sometimes multiple references in the first two pages.

e-mail

With the growing interest in the site, e-mail very soon became an integral and accepted communications tool which allowed Richard to respond quickly to all enquiries. He accessed his mailbox once a day, usually in the evening but if there was time he would also look in the morning. Enquiries were dealt with then and there.

Costs

"my use of eCommerce has been the most cost effective form of advertising. There are no significant costs other than my time but business has doubled"

From the time of their first 6 page web site, Farmyard Nursery have always made use of BT's Internet services. They started with BT Internet and then expanded to a Connect to Business account as extra services were required. They still retain their initial BT Internet account and web site as part of their migration strategy.

At the present time running costs are less than £25 month. Connection to the net is via a 56kbps modem and whilst emails are now downloaded every morning all other communications such as sending emails, internet access or uploading material to the web site is done at night or weekends using BT's free access service. The web authoring software, AOL Press, was downloaded free from the Net.

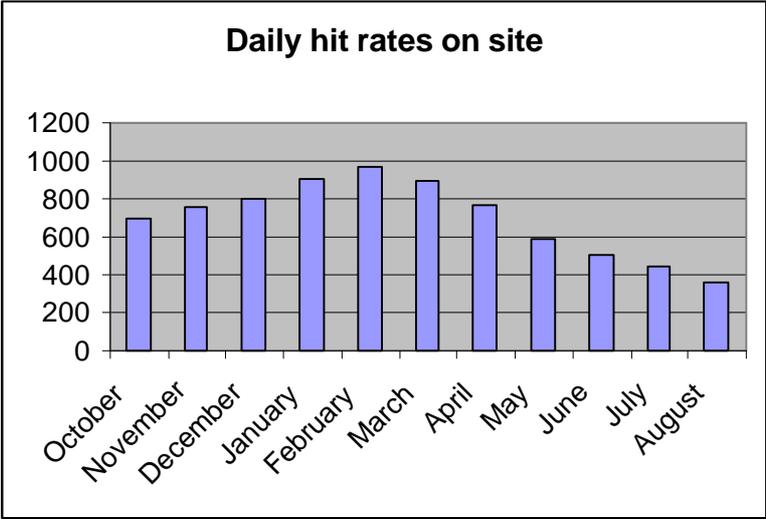
Monthly costs are made up of:

	£
Two ISP accounts.	19.98
Email downloads	3.00
Total monthly spend	22.98

The nursery receive approximately 10 useful emails per day and it takes about 15 minutes to respond to them. Traditionally the nursery have sent out paper catalogues. These were always out of date and cost 75p each to produce. Now for every one request for a paper catalogue they receive 10 for an electronic equivalent.

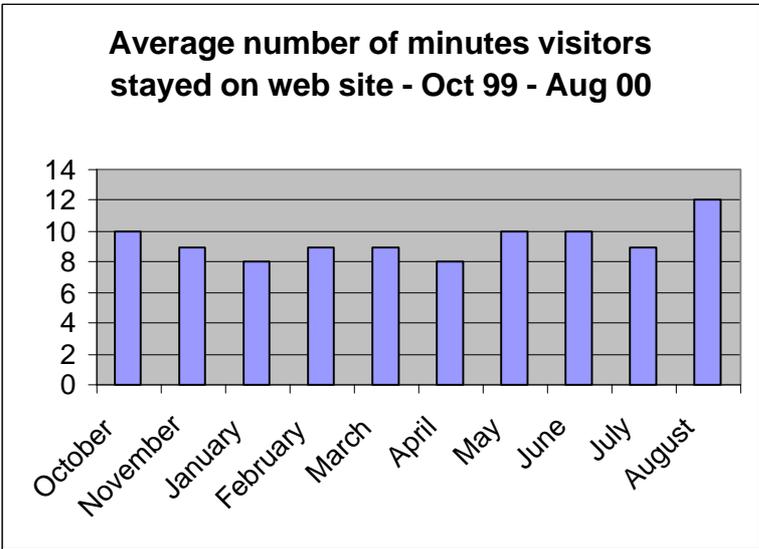
The nursery receives junk mail and estimates that for every 10 useful message they receive another 10 are binned. It has also been noticed that over the time they have been using email, the number of failed messages they have sent out has significantly reduced. Email addresses are more stable and people less likely to chop and change between addresses as email becomes an accepted communication medium.

The graph below shows how daily hit rates increased up to February 2000 when the site was last updated and then the numbers dropped away. This reflects the fact that due to commitments to other business opportunities that eCommerce had generated, time had not been found to update the site. Search engines don't like sites which are not regularly updated and the lack of new material impacted on the number of people revisiting the site. It also reflects the fact that interest in hellebores is seasonal. The plants flower from January through to April and hence this is when most interest is expected.



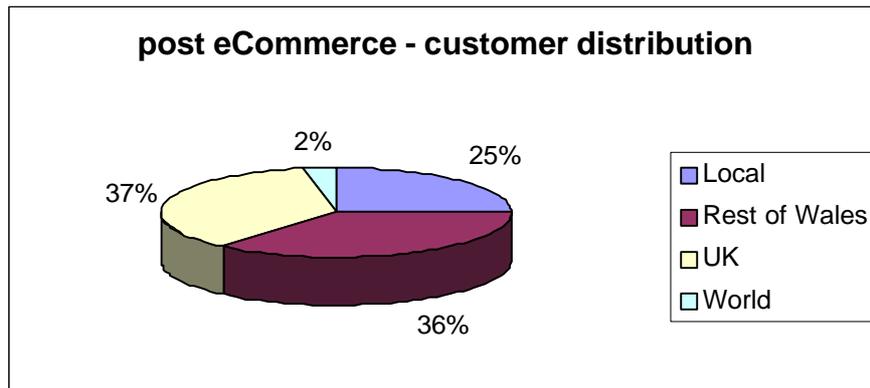
What is important for other SMEs to realise is that you don't have to have tens of thousands of visitors per week before eCommerce works for them. The numbers of visitors to FN's site is not high, yet it has proved very beneficial.

The daily hit rate at the peak of interest (February 2000) equated to 28000 page hits per month and 1182 unique visitors. The length of time visitors stay on a web site is frequently referred to as the stickiness factor. Using figures obtain from analysis of web log files, FN have typically retained visitors to their site for between 8 and 12 minutes per visit.



The company 18 months on

The last 18 months have been one of tremendous change for Farmyard Nurseries. eCommerce has been a major catalyst, bringing it's own direct benefits but also engendering an environment which brought about new business opportunities. The prime benefit has been the exposure of the company and its products to a much wider customer audience than ever before both directly via their web site and indirectly through the many articles and news items carried in the national and trade press.

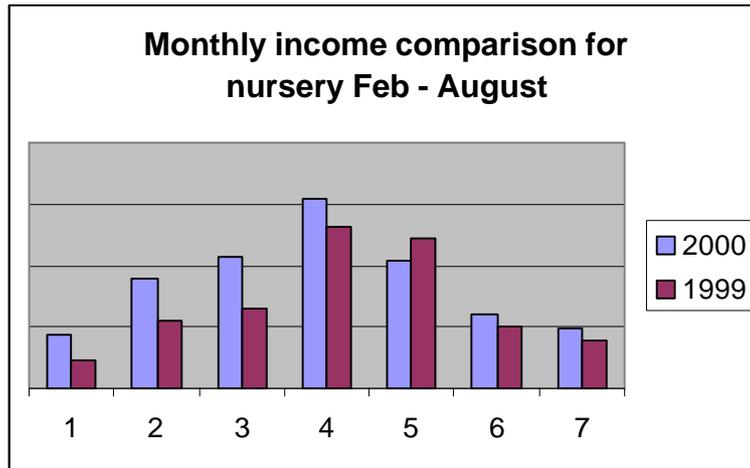


Their use of the internet and proactive marketing has resulted in considerable press coverage. Articles and features have appeared in:

- Sunday Times
- Sunday Telegraph
- Sunday Express
- Country life
- RHS members magazine - the Gardener
- Amateur Gardening
- Gardening Which

Richard has also featured in TV programmes, videos and articles in overseas gardening magazines. Such exposure generates significant interest and traffic to both the web site and the nursery. Richard estimates the value of this free advertising to be in the order of £15,000 - £20,000 to date.

The number of visitors to the nursery to buy plants has certainly increased during this period by an estimated 25% and the average customer spend per transaction has



increased by 20% to £30. The specialist plants featured on the web site may have been the reason why visitors came in the first place but sales of other plants also increased.

Plants and hellebore seeds, have been sold by mail order to:

- Australia
- New Zealand
- Sweden
- Germany
- USA
- France
- Italy
- Netherlands
- Japan
- Ireland

"our pragmatic use of eCommerce has changed the company from a small self contained unit to one with a world interest."

The web site has brought contact from other growers around the world and enabled Richard to take on new plant strains and varieties. It has also resulted in increasing the number of hypertext links into his web site, an important issue for search engine rankings.

The biggest change was the award of a contract to run the plant centre at the National Botanical Gardens of Wales, Middleton Hall (MH). Certainly the award of the contract could not be directly attributed to FN's use of eCommerce. Quality and range of plants was a major factor as was the drive and enthusiasm shown by Richard and his staff in a situation where several well known UK garden centres were being considered. However, their early use of eCommerce and the quality of their web site were seen as a major contributing factor in their selection.

The new plant centre at MH doesn't follow the trends of the traditional nursery. Whilst July and August would see a dip in trade as gardeners wait for the autumn to add plants or are on holiday, sales at MH continue at a constant rate. FN are selling between 50 and 100% more plants than had originally been expected and could

mean a doubling of FN's turnover in the first year of operation. The plant centre is near to the motorway and a future objective is to use the Internet to make more gardeners in South Wales aware of the range of plants on offer in such a convenient location.

The developments at MH have also resulted in a new customer as Middleton Hall are now using Richard and the Llandysul Nursery as a source of plants for the Botanical gardens.

The demand of MH and increased numbers of visitors to the nursery itself has had dramatic impact on the number of plants being grown.

Main Nursery Llandysul

While the main development has certainly been MH, a lot has been happening at the nursery. Richard has increased growing capacity significantly. He has erected 10 x 75ft poly tunnels for plant cultivation. Much of this stock is aimed at Middleton Hall and increased nursery demand. He has also expanded the main outdoor storage area for herbaceous plants by about 1/3.

The overall trade from customers buying at Llandysul has improved considerably. Richard estimates that turnover is up by as much as 25%. This is as a direct result of two developments - eCommerce and new customers who initially bought from the plant centre at MH. As Richard believes his web site influenced the decision making for the plant centre contract, it is difficult to separate out how much of the success should be attributed to eCommerce directly or indirectly.

A knock on benefit in respect of suppliers has also been felt due to the success which FN has achieved. In the past FN might have been quoted a 4 months delivery on certain supplies such as plant pots or compost. Now it is down to 2 weeks, delivered on an agreed date and with better prices and discounts because they are now seen as being in a new league, and all of which impacts on overall profitability.

One or two plant growers have talked about launching new varieties at MH and hence the potential for FN to take on new plants and more importantly to gain the increased press coverage.

Staffing implications

Making time available to deal with eCommerce has become a major problem. The time required for the running of the expanding business is such that day to day problems and issues are dealt with before eCommerce. This was especially true during the spring of 2000 when the plant centre was established from scratch. There was a six month period during which Richard was only able to respond to emails but didn't have time to update his web site. It was not until late summer 2000, that Richard again found the time to progress his eCommerce activities.

Three staff are employed to run the new plant centre supported as required by Richard and staff who deliver plants on a daily basis from the nursery.

Because of the overall growth of the business, Richard has had to take more of a management role. He spends far less time working with the plants and more time organising and managing. He has taken on more staff, many of whom are part time.

He now employs 27 with one of the new staff members employed to support the running of the office which has enabled better control of paperwork. She also responds to emails and is gaining the skills and knowledge required to update the web site. Some of the new staff have been taken on under the government's New Deal scheme which has pleased the local employment office. However, finding good staff is a problem.

He has organised his staff into different areas of responsibility as he now knows he can't handle everything. These are:

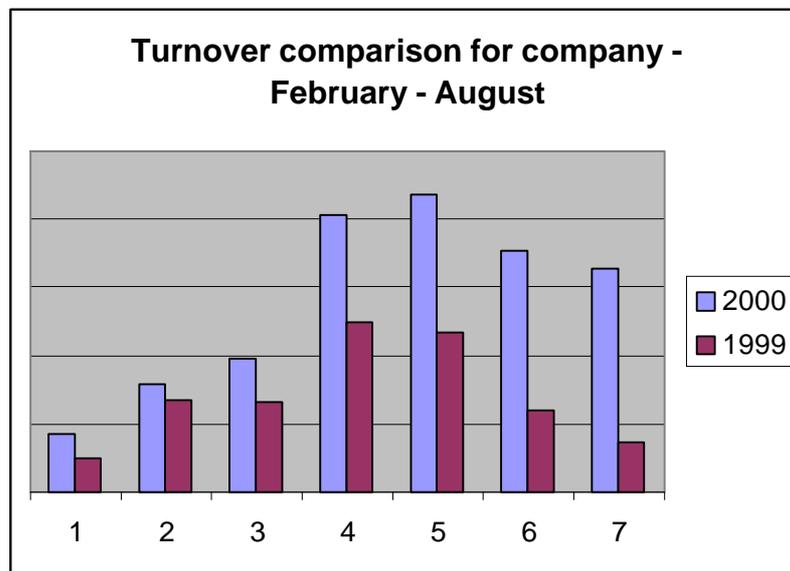
- Shrubs
- Herbaceous
- Sales/nursery/shop
- Office and technical
- Logistics
- Middleton Hall

Richard see that technology has an important role to play in the development of the Farmyard Nurseries.

"Our most pressing issue is lack of resources to address our eCommerce needs. It does require time and some skills and knowledge in order to ensure your site attract visitors from search engines or links from other sites"

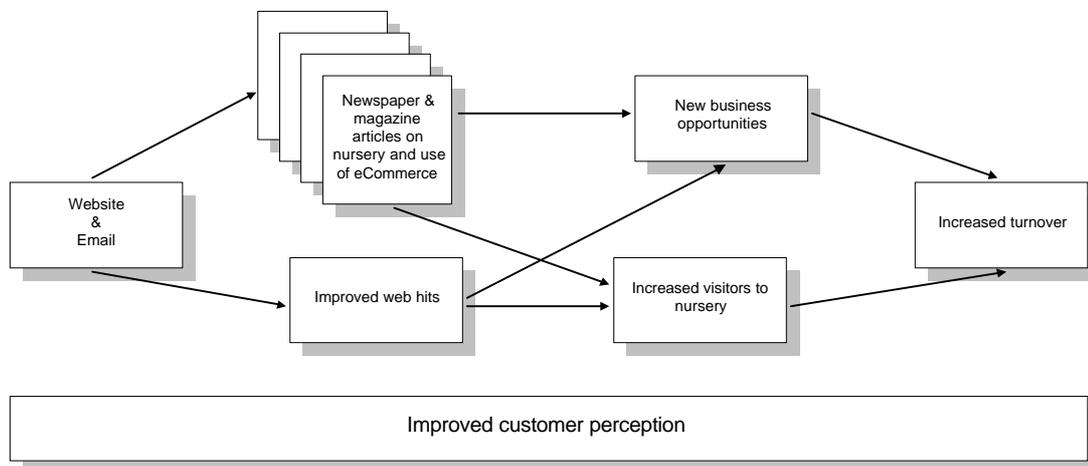
Benefits

As with many SMEs who have been successful with eCommerce it is difficult to define the impact of direct and indirect benefits. The use of eCommerce and the success of new business ventures are seen by Richard as being inextricably linked



. He firmly believes without eCommerce he wouldn't have been awarded the contract for the new plants centre at Middleton Hall. How much of the increased sales at the nursery should be directly attributed to their successful use of eCommerce or could it be related to the high levels of press coverage given to the company, all of which subsequently pointed people to the company web site and encouraged them to visit the nursery.

Richard has spent considerable time promoting and marketing his web site but believes that it is equally important to do traditional marketing in which reference is always made to the web site. The fact that he obtain so much free advertising because the high coverage he has been given could also be seen as a direct benefit.



Key performance indicators

Number of staff	increased from 14 to 27		
Nursery turnover	Increased by £27000 (23%) in first eight months of 2000		
Company Turnover	Increased by 97% in first eight months of 2000		
Increase in plant propagation area	From: 2.5 acres + 24 growing tunnels	To: 3 acres + 34 growing tunnels	
Visitors to nursery	+25%		

What next?

Once the plant centre is more settled, Richard would like to consider the whole IT infrastructure for the company. At the heart of his business is the need for a central database (of plants) which other applications can access. The computerised plant labelling system, the central accounts system, the future need to order directly from the plant centre at Middleton Hall, and the possibility of an on-line searchable plant catalogue, all rely on access to the same core information.

Richard would also like to use electronic links with all suppliers but he feels most nurseries and suppliers to the horticultural trade are slow at adopting modern trading practices. On many occasions it was better to phone and talk to a supplier rather than consider sending an electronic order.

Summary

The pragmatic use of eCommerce coupled with Richard Bramley's drive, vision and enthusiasm has meant that Farmyard Nurseries have experienced a rate of growth never thought possible before eCommerce. It has not meant having to sell direct from a web site but it has taken the company's use of new technology forward at a pace they could live with and relate to. It has resulted in significant increased turnover as well as creating 13 new jobs and new skills. Benefits have been both direct and indirect and the company look forward to making even greater use of eCommerce both internally and in relations with their suppliers,

"it is difficult to know where the benefits from eCommerce finish and those from other business activities begin"

Farmyard Nurseries web site can be found at <http://www.farmyardnurseries.co.uk>