

# What Small Businesses Need from an E-marketplace

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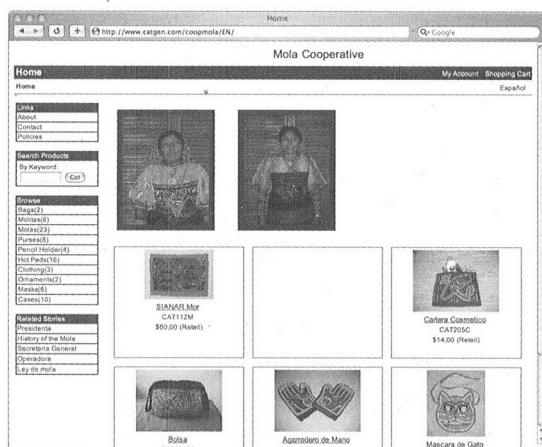
Keeping technology applications simple and focused; working collectively through business networks; and tapping into a network of global contacts for technical adaptations has helped this business support organization offer online solutions to small exporters.

Since 1995, *PEOPLink* has helped small exporting firms with e-commerce applications. *PEOPLink* discovered that small exporters don't know how to capture the benefits of the Internet

for their businesses, have high access costs, find technology applications too expensive and complicated, and cannot manage the potential complexities of online payments.

## Simplifying online marketing

In 2000, *PEOPLink* assembled a virtual team of programmers — working from locations as dispersed as Albania, Ecuador,



Online catalogue developed by an indigenous women's cooperative (<http://www.catgen.com/coopmola>).



Embroidery catalogue from rural Brazil with online wholesale to Brazil, Portugal and the United States. It was built entirely via a cell phone connection to the Internet (<http://www.catgen.com/doupreto>).



Portal of nine Nepalese artisan organizations selling thousands of dollars of crafts directly to consumers in the United States via their own catalogues and also via CatGen's interface with eBay. The sellers implemented the "little boxes inside big ones" consolidation system to make viable the international distribution of small items (<http://www.catgen.com/nepalcraft>).

India, Ireland, Siberia and the Ukraine — to develop an e-trade platform that would answer the concerns of small businesses.

Called CatGen, for "catalogue generator", the software allows companies to market themselves individually and as a group. Non-technical users can quickly organize and digitize company and product information and images. The software also facilitates printing paper catalogues and publishing to CDs.

Among the features that help small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are templates that can be previewed offline, for easy control of graphic design. Password-protected sites are available for each client. This way, small firms can work from shared computers such as those found in Internet cafes or at local chambers of commerce. They also offer multilingual instruction manuals and templates; multiple pricing schedules; integrated web traffic analysis; and low-cost web hosting.

## E-marketplace solutions for small firms

Businesses can jointly develop searchable "catalogue of catalogues" portals, to provide the visibility and credibility that are impossible for individual merchant catalogues. They can also insert themselves in other marketplaces easily, because the software is designed to do just that. To facilitate small orders, the software offers credit card payment facilities and aids to streamline export documentation, including built-in harmonized tariff codes and United Nations Standard Products and Services Code (UNSPSC) categorization tools.

## Challenges for small firms

E-commerce is more complicated than most "industry experts" predicted. All but the largest firms in developing countries still face challenges.

- ▶ Knowledge of personal computers and the Internet is not widespread — most entrepreneurs are either not aware of e-commerce's potential, or have unrealistically high expectations.
- ▶ Internet access is often expensive, slow and unreliable.
- ▶ Most e-commerce tools and business models are relatively costly and often assume high bandwidth, English language skills and strong technical skills.
- ▶ Achieving visibility and credibility for potential buyers to trust a vendor they haven't met in person is extremely difficult.
- ▶ Making small payments for shipments across international borders is complicated and expensive.

## A network of technicians

A network of technicians around the world helps PEOPLink adapt the software to local needs. In a typical project, PEOPLink assesses the needs/potential of local business networks. It trains the trainers and guides them towards self-sufficiency by providing e-commerce support services including training, technical assistance, digital imaging, custom template creation and translation. PEOPLink also provides direction on promotion, payment and shipping logistics, thereby placing the final pieces in the global e-trade puzzle for SMEs. ▶

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