



# When is a door not a door? When it's a portal! **By Matt Toon**

**T**he growth of the Internet has been both a blessing and a curse for businesses. The ease of setting up a web site has allowed everybody to get some sort of presence on the Internet, ranging from a small set of descriptive web pages to a full-blown e-commerce site. Such a deluge of websites is also a curse. Finding information on the highly cluttered Internet can be a time consuming, laborious (and often unproductive) process - whilst a definite aid, search engines are prone to displaying sites that conform to specific criteria.

The answer for many web servers and companies has been the construction of web portals. Portals fall into two generic camps, for both horizontal and vertical markets. Their basic purpose is to act as doorways to the rest of the web. Horizontal portals (such as [www.yahoo.co.uk](http://www.yahoo.co.uk)) provide a wide base of information for their customers on a wide variety of subjects, while Vertical portals provide a narrow range of functionality for specific subject areas, (i.e. [www.geoplace.com](http://www.geoplace.com)). Portals have become one of the success stories of the web; they have also become some of the most fiercely competitive web businesses, with rival vendors providing more and more functionality in order to attract users to their site.

Whilst Internet Mapping Systems are being used within portals to provide additional functionality, another growth market for GIS on the Internet has been the field of Map Portals. Map Portals are sites that specialize in serving maps, either for inclusion in other websites or

providing other businesses with the ability to place their outlets on a map. As with many things on the Internet, Internet mapping can be a complex and expensive business, especially if you don't have the in-house skills to develop your own site. Search engines and web portals provide you with the ability to search the Internet; Map Portals provide you with the ability to search a location.

Sites such as [www.streetmap.co.uk](http://www.streetmap.co.uk) provide mapping powered by a simple postcode or street name search. Such maps are easily incorporated into one's own web site through the inclusion of a simple link to an appropriate Universal Resource Locator (URL). As this is generated on the fly, any updates to the mapping will be reflected in your image. As long as the site permits it then this can be seen as an easy way of getting mapping onto your site. If you have more than one location then you can do it for more than one area, allowing a company to provide map links for all of their outlets.

One step further from simple linking to maps is being seen on the map itself. [www.multimap.com](http://www.multimap.com) is a good example of such geo-located selling. Not only does [multimap.com](http://www.multimap.com) offer geo-located banner advertisements, where certain banner ads are shown when you navigate to a certain location, but it also provides the facility to plot outlets at a particular location. This means that users interested in certain locations can find details about all facilities available there. This is seen to work very effectively for tourism sites such as [www.visitbritain.com](http://www.visitbritain.com) whose

mapping shows all of the available accommodation, tourist information centres and general places to visit. Such examples of vertical map portals can work for many industries, from entertainment to government, taking the burden of setup and management away from the business while still allowing users to provide spatial data on their web sites. While many map portals are still seen as an 'extra' to the 'real' information about a site, companies such as Multimedia Mapping have shown how a map service provider can facilitate Internet mapping with richer functionality for both small and large businesses.

Such map portals are not for everyone - as is the case with other managed services, there is a degree of loss of control. Audiences cannot be targeted exactly and there is the risk of a competitor's products being shown at the same time as one's own. Certain specific queries and spatial relationships may not be available at the site and viewers may be restricted to the base mapping that is available. Finally, providing links to external mapping can encourage people to leave your site. By hosting your own mapping you can exercise greater control over how they navigate through your site, control what they see and how it is represented, control what queries can be performed and analyze more thoroughly the way people use your site.

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