Construction activity rises at the rate of 49 percent per month.

Can this be true?

If we’re talking about office buildings, that would equate to one new Empire State Building going up each week. If the example were roads, we would see ribbon-cutting ceremonies on interstate-quality highways stretching from Orlando to Tampa, every day.

Far-fetched ideas? Yes, but the figure is real—on the Internet.

What is the Internet? Why should you care? The Internet is a collection of computers located virtually around the world. Individually, these are typically very powerful computers. When you connect these individual computers, when you form a network with them, you increase their power exponentially. This networking forms the Internet.

Each day, more companies are discovering the Internet and wondering not only how to tap into this incredible technology but also what to do once they start “surfing the ‘Net.” This term comes from the user’s ability to tap into one computer’s database (think of it as a very large library) and seamlessly link to many other databases. Once you’re in this large, virtual library, you can pick out one book, and that one book may lead you into another room of the library, or it may even take you into another library.

This new library may not be in the same building (computer). It may be in another building in another city, or another state or even in another country. Think of the travel cost involved if you had to go to another country to look up construction information. If you’re “surfing the ‘Net,” your travel cost is limited to your local phone bill and access charges to the host computer.

How to Get There

Let’s pretend for a moment that you’re a general contractor sitting at your computer and looking for information that affects your market. As you access the Internet, you may be looking for new projects to bid. If you’ve successfully bid on government projects for the Veterans Administration, you may pick out a book in your library that links you to a government computer in Washington, D.C. This computer may lead you to the VA list of upcoming projects. You also may find yourself viewing a list of projects that fit your specialty for construction in a foreign country.

Let’s say you want to research a new construction technique or a new construction product. You may find the Internet address of the Library of Congress that allows you to do the research. Or, you may find the address of a magazine that caters to the construction industry that has a recent article on the new technique or product that interests you.

Once you’ve read this article you may want to continue the research by traveling to the city or country where the writer of the article lives. If the writer lives in your town, the journey may be brief and profitable. If the writer lives in
another state or another country, travel cost could be prohibitive. What’s an alternative? Why not just “surf the ‘Net?” With the explosive growth of the Internet the writer probably has an Internet address. It’s a simple matter of using e-mail to send the writer a request for more information. If communicating via e-mail over the Internet doesn’t appeal to you, then use it to set up a regular phone call.

Wired for Success

Think of the Internet as a giant construction fraternity. Everyone is wired together for a common purpose—to succeed. Construction activity on the ‘Net is on the rise.

Already, some construction firms, design firms and management consulting firms to the construction industry are setting up their own home page. What’s a home page? It’s an intersection on the Internet, plus a billboard on the Internet. It’s an opportunity to tell fellow surfers what products and services you can provide.

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As an example, we recently surfed the Net to see what the Yahoo search engine would find if we input the word “construction.” To our delight, it found 117 examples (two weeks ago there were only 32) of firms on the Internet with construction in their home page titles. One caveat: In the language of the Internet, “under construction” does not always pertain to the construction industry it may be a reference to a home page that is not complete.

As a result of the search, we found a construction firm based in Hawaii. The company’s logo was listed along with the mission statement. Think of the home page as the virtual library we mentioned earlier. As we picked out a book on one of these shelves, it took us to another book that listed the company’s current projects. We picked another book in this new library that provided a monthly update of each of their projects currently under construction. Activity climbs daily.

Today GCs with a home page are the exception. But in a few years they will be the marketing rule. As a recent survey by The Contractors Management Journal shows, our industry is computer-oriented. Ninety-nine percent of top managers said that their firms are PC users, and 38 percent subscribe to an on-line service. Many on-line providers are now offering access to the World Wide Web, and it won’t be long before it’s heavily used by contractors.

The opportunities for the construction industry on the Internet are incredible, but be patient. The Internet is busiest when East and West Coast U.S. firms are doing business at the same time. Easterners may find the early morning hours less crowded, while Westerners may enjoy faster access during the evening. The Internet is growing rapidly and with new advances in technologies, its speed will improve.

Where’s the Catch?

With so many construction sites on the information superhighway, detours are common, as are delays. Don’t be dis-
couraged if you get a message that says you can’t connect to a home page, or that you can’t download a file. If you try again immediately, chances are good that your connection may be successful.

It’s just like the real world, where delays and detours keep us from reaching our destination as quickly as we would like. But keep in mind that, just like the real world, once construction is complete the highway is smoother, we arrive at our destination quicker, and the journey is more enjoyable.

This is the first in a series of articles designed to help expose you, the construction manager, to the future of the construction industry. You’ve heard about the information superhighway. You’ve wondered why anyone in construction should care. As with any new frontier, there are challenges. Some begin this journey not knowing how long they will travel. Some begin not knowing their final destination or what obstacles and opportunities await them. Some will wait for others to return from the journey and tell them what’s ahead.

The future of the construction industry is being mapped out today on the Internet. You can wait for others (GCs, subcontractors, construction suppliers, owners, architects, engineers, designers) to tell you how it benefited them—or you can be a pioneer.

Remember, construction activity is up, 49 percent every week.

About the Author
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