

Ormsby pioneers electronic accounting service

New ground

Bottom Line Staff

MISSISSAUGA—An accounting firm office traditionally has served as the “store” into which walked clients who needed and received services. The Internet is beginning to change that concept with the growth of the virtual office.

Francis Mackan, a partner in Ormsby & Mackan, Chartered Accountants, has pioneered the use of the Internet in small public accounting offices. Ormsby & Mackan were one of the first CA firms to have a Website. Today the firm is breaking new ground by providing electronic accounting services to clients around the world. They use the World Wide Web and e-mail to provide the same services performed by traditional accounting firms.

“We use the Internet on a daily basis. We recently picked up a client with nine companies, from an inquiry to our Website. They have offices in Vancouver, New York and London, England, and all of our services are provided via the Net,” said Mackan.

Every day the client scans invoices and sends them to Mississauga via e-mail. The firm enters the transactions into NewViews and then sends statements and cheque registers back to the client via e-mail attachments.

Mackan uses the Internet as a management tool by doing research on the Web. “Clients want to be aware of current trends. We look for information that will help our clients and I spend at least an hour a day on the Net.”

Ormsby & Mackan have recognized that business owners turn to their accountants for advice. According to U.S. publishing company Faulkner & Gray, clients are twice as likely to approach their accountants for answers to technology questions than any other professional.

It is estimated that Canadian accounting firms will bill over \$175 million for technology consulting in 1997. According to Microsoft, for every product an accountant finds recommendable, the accountant will make 22 recommendations of that product to clients.

These statistics clearly show that business owners see public accountants as a valuable resource. It also follows that, if a business wants to go online to do business, they will turn to their financial adviser for advice. If their accountant is not an early adopter of the Internet, they will lose that business.

There are four ways an accounting professional can use the Internet as a tool: communications, news, research and marketing.

According to Francis Mackan, “Saving money is making money. An accounting firm can reduce their cost of communicating with clients by using the Net. Most everyone relies on the Internet for e-mail, but there is much more to communications, such as being able to attach files for clients to view in their own office.”

In addition to saving paper and printing costs, the Internet can be used to electronically manage accounts payable and receivable. E-mail also provides an electronic audit trail of all client communications which can be used in conjunction with other software tools such as contact managers.

If you're going to be a successful financial adviser you need to have better information than your clients

do. Accountants who provide personal and corporate financial planning services to their clients can enhance those services by subscribing to Internet news, stock prices, and tickler services which allow them to easily stay on top of their clients' investment portfolios.

Let's say you have a client who holds a position in Microsoft. With a free news service such as PointCast, you will be kept up to date on all the latest happenings in Redmond and can quickly make your client aware of any late-breaking news from that company.

The Internet can also be an effective way to promote a public accounting firm. There has been a trend over the last several years to “boutique” firms providing expertise in specialized areas. As Ormsby & Mackan have found, businesses are using the Web to find people who specialize or offer the particular services they want. According to Mackan, “our Website has brought us new clients. We got our large ‘virtual office’ client directly from an inquiry at www.ormack.com.”

Mackan believes that the Internet provides a public accounting firm with a superb marketing tool. “It allows us to communicate and educate a potential worldwide audience.”

Hot tips

Firms can provide a resource to their client base by putting newsletters, hot tips and new legislation on their Website. Putting information in a centralized area for all clients and guests to visit saves them time.

There are some keys to building a successful Net presence. Your Website must be visually pleasing and you need to humanize the pages. One good way is to include photos and bios of key people in the firm. The site must be kept up to date with a steady stream of new infor-

mation. You also must make it easy for people to find you. Ormsby & Mackan advertise their site in the *Financial Post*, which Mackan says is “cost effective, raises the image of our firm, and has provided us with new clients.” At the very least your site should be registered with the major search engines. You should also point to your site in your collateral marketing materials and your e-mail address and Website should be on your business cards and letterhead.

The Internet can enhance your firm's visibility, expand your client base and provide valuable services to your clients. To be successful into the millennium, public accounting firms are going to have to embrace the electronic highway. □