

BOARDWATCH

MAGAZINE

Guide to the Internet, World Wide Web and BBS

107th **MONTHLY ISSUE**

World Wide Web Blackout



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ISP TALK

by Bob Rankin

EXECNET - Ten Years Young



Andy Keeves and EXECNET have done it all and now do even more

Encyclopedia that Keeves made available. No games or fancy graphics, and no user fees either.

Although the BBS was not a commercial venture at first, it soon "grew out of its own space," so it became necessary to charge a nominal fee to cover the costs involved in equipment and upgrades. Most BBSs at the time were purely hobby boards, making Keeves an early adopter of the concept of running a commercial BBS. Under his direction, EXECNET has evolved into the largest and oldest online service in New York State's Westchester County region, and was awarded the prestigious Dvorak Award for Excellence in Telecommunications in 1994.

Keeves admits to making some mistakes early on by focusing almost exclusively on one industry. He paid for it big time when the real estate market rapidly declined six or seven years ago. "We saw our revenues go down to about 20% of what they were almost overnight," Keeves said, "so the logical choice was to shift focus to the online system, which was actually generating revenue at the time."

In an effort to expand in the early 90's, EXECNET was looking for more material, and USENET was where they decided to get it. But there really was no software at the time to do USENET conferences on a PC Board system. "All our stuff was Novell on DOS machines — no UNIX," recalls Keeves. But when Sparcware developed a tool to convert a UUCP feed into PC Board conferences, Keeves jumped on it. "That really gave us a head start, because there were only 2 or 3 other people doing that type of thing back then. Taking the Internet and putting it on a DOS box was almost totally unheard of."

Keeves says there is "definitely a big difference" between the typical BBS user of yesteryear and today's Internet customers. "They were much more knowledgeable and inquisitive," says Keeves, contrasting them to today's mouse potatoes who are "not quite sure what their AUTOEXEC.BAT file is. We get people who sign onto our text-based BBS system today who see **Press R to read e-mail** and they get totally lost. The classic situation is a person who leaves a message for me that says 'How do I read my mail?' It does get kind of silly sometimes."

EXECNET has been offering a full range of Internet services for about 2-1/2 years now, from text-based access on the BBS to SLIP/PPP and beyond. In February, EXECNET announced the

elimination of online time charges from its "Classic/2" memberships, offering subscribers unlimited Internet usage for a flat fee of **\$19.95** a month.

Keeves says that they were fortunate to find some UNIX-savvy people to help them out when they started to get serious about being an ISP, but they have since brought that talent in-house. "Thank God it's not me!" laughs Keeves.

As to how fast he sees his Internet services expanding, Keeves says, "I think it really depends only on us at this point. The hype in the marketplace is so big now that if you're willing to go full-bore and put the word out, you can overload yourself almost overnight. We're trying to grow in a much more controlled fashion...I'd hate to go out of business because we got too much business. And I have seen that happen."

As far as marketing, EXECNET is operating on a "keep it local" philosophy now, catering mostly to people who can make a free call to reach them. They've relied on newspaper and direct mail in the past to gain new customers, but have recently started offering a customized "Internet Access Kit" on diskette as a tool to entice new users.

They also go after Chamber of Commerce members with a view towards offering them Web services. EXECNET has a **PowerWeb** offering for businesses that want to focus on developing Web content rather than dealing with the hardware and system maintenance headaches themselves. Businesses can choose from a whole spectrum of bandwidth, storage and service offerings that range from **\$9.95** to **\$699** per month.

Keeves says he's really not interested in selling Internet access to other providers, and prefers to characterize EXECNET as a combination Internet service and content provider. "We provide connectivity to the locals, but we also provide content — I think that's vital for any smaller operation like ours. We realize that when the cable companies start offering 500 Mbps access for \$10 a month, the typical dial-up provider is going to be in big trouble."

So what's an ISP to do? "Build a site that will attract people for other reasons beside the fact that they can access the Internet through you," says Keeves. "Whether it's information exchange, localized databases or something else, you need a niche. It's no different than the BBS scene of 5 to 10 years ago."

Keeves sees a lot of potential in the concept of connecting local people with area businesses as opposed to just putting up web pages for businesses with no real value added for his callers. "Unless you're going to bring in a hundred thousand or a few million customers like AOL, you've got to go after the business community because that's where 90% of the money is. The business community really wants to be on the Internet — they might not know why, but they do!"

Although there's really no limit as to how big he'll allow EXECNET to grow, Keeves says he does want to keep control over that growth. "We've always been very cautious about that over the years. I guess it was Clint Eastwood who said in one of the Dirty Harry movies, 'A man's got to know his limitations.' And if you're not willing to face that, you will get yourself in trouble."♦

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Regards,
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