



### NIGEL WITHAM

“Today I bought three books, two flights and booked a hotel. I paid some bills, checked how much time my design team had spent working and what we would be billing, updated my business forecasts and conducted conversations with colleagues working in India and New Zealand. I checked the latest news, sent a number of letters, and instantly obtained directions to my appointments. For me a fairly average business day but during the whole day I used the phone only once and I did all this between two out-of-town meetings without even going to the office. That’s what I can do using the internet with just a mobile phone and a laptop computer and it’s simple.

If I wanted I could order tiles too. Although, actually I can’t because, try as I might, I can’t find anyone with a decent on-line tile store. If you have one let me know and I will hold you up as a shining example.

Most homes have computers, most computers have internet access, most people know how to use it. Most tile stores think their customers should visit them. There are good reasons for this but someone, someday soon, is going to start selling tiles and tiling products successfully on the web. When they do they will take a little bit of the market from those who don’t. And it won’t matter where that web store is based. It could be in the next country or the next street, to the customer it will be instantly accessible either way.

Of course there are problems, what about carriage, samples, return goods? All these are valid points but there are lots of companies that regret not being the first on-line retailer of books or flights or computers. Believe me if you can buy cars on line, or baths and toilets, the problems of selling tiles can be overcome. Like it or not, a proportion of the market for tiles will soon be served by internet retailers. If you have a warehouse and distribution centre you can take advantage. If you have electronic point of sale systems and stock control you are even better placed and you can set the whole thing up for much less than the investment you’d have to make to open a new bricks and mortar store.

One problem I encounter is that many tile retailers are not very computer savvy and are unwilling to spend time learning the basics. We often have enquiries for web site design from companies that regard having a web site as a burden, as something they must have to look serious, rather than as a valuable business tool. Consequently, they only want to pay for the cheapest web design service they can find. I don’t do work of this type but you will have seen the results obtained from those who do. I’d like to promote a better, much more far-reaching approach - one in which your web site is not just regarded as a second-class sales tool that receives no care, attention or budget. The approach I have in mind puts a web site at the very centre of operations, creates sales, releases staff from monotonous tasks and enhances your customer’s experience.

Here is how I think it could work. Most retail and distribution businesses above a tiny size have a stock database. When a sale is made stock is allocated and accounted for. This information is used to analyse sales, profit and loss and to prompt re-orders. It could be used for much more.

Imagine this scenario. A customer visits your web site. Your web site is linked in your computer to your stock database. The customer views the whole range of tiles and other products that you sell, checks prices and requests samples. In doing so they provide an e-mail address and a delivery address. Already, you know where they live and what products interest them. Your computer system logs the enquiry, processes a credit card payment for the sample and sends an e-mail to your warehouse from where the sample is dispatched. The computer even prints the invoice, delivery note and address label. The sample is delivered.

Two days later your computer automatically sends an e-mail to the customer with a response form to see if they like the sample. If they do, they fill in the form and press the button. Your computer receives the order, processes payment, allocates the stock, and sends an e-mail to the customer telling them when the goods will be delivered. It then updates your sales ledger and prints the invoice and packing label in your warehouse, it sends an e-mail to your courier and, if the stock has fallen below a pre-set threshold, it sends an e-mail to your supplier placing an order for more stock. It requests e-mail responses to all of this and lets you know if it doesn’t get one. So far only one person has had to get involved. The one who picked the stock and put it on the delivery van.

You soon acquire a valuable database of customers who you know have seriously thought about buying tiles. By using e-mail you can instantly let them know about special promotions without buying expensive advertising space or paying for printed brochures and postage.

But there’s more. You have a tile showroom. A customer visits, they have come from some distance and they take a sample or place an order. Your sales consultant, using your very same web site, scans the product bar code and the computer logs the details of the product, just like normal EPOS, into the web site. In addition your consultant enters the customer details including their e-mail address. By the time the customer has left the shop they have been sent an e-mail response form and a customer satisfaction questionnaire. They can now order more tiles, or after-products any time of day or night without leaving home.

How useful would this be to your regular trade customers?

Now what you have is a secure fully-integrated system that can manage customer relations, track sales, receive payment, promote special offers, place orders, inform customers when their orders will be fulfilled, calculate your turnover and profit, calculate your sales consultant’s bonuses, unburden your staff and control your stock. If you want you can access it from anywhere in the world.

And believe me, this is just the beginning.”