

2020 vision for the web

The growth of the web since 2000 has been massive and in the 'new' economies - China, Brazil, Russia, India, Eastern Europe that is likely to continue apace. It's not until penetration reaches that of the phone that the market will mature. That's lots of growth as the figures below indicate.

WORLD INTERNET USAGE AND POPULATION STATISTICS 2009						
World Regions	Est. pop millions	Users 2000 millions	Users Latest	Pen %	Inc %	User %
Africa	991	4	66	6.7	1,359.9	3.9
Asia	3,808	114	704	18.5	516.1	42.2
Europe	803	105	402	50.1	282.9	24.2
Middle East	202	3	48	23.7	1,360.2	2.9
North America	341	108	252	73.9	132.9	15.1
South America	587	18	176	30.0	873.1	10.5
Oceania	35	7	21	60.1	173.4	1.2
WORLD TOTAL	6,768	361	1,669	24.7	362.3	100.0

Internet Usage and World population Statistics are for June 30, 2009. www.internetworldstats.com.
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Given this likely growth what will the web look like in 2020?

Well, there are two sides to that coin – the way the technology works and then the ways we use it.

Technology

According to technology expert and entrepreneur [Nova Spivack](#), the development of the web moves in 10-year cycles.

In the first decade, most of the development focused on the back end. In the second decade, focus shifted to the front end and the era social media, mash-ups and experiments to make the web more interactive. The next cycle will shift focus to the back end again. Then by 2020 focus will return to the front end and we'll see thousands of new ways to use the web.

Some of the predictions for the next 10 years are the:

- 'ever present' web will merge with all other forms of entertainment and everything will be delivered via the web. Everything (phones, fridges, the lot) will connect to the net and you will have a constant connection to the web at work, at home, driving, in the pub or restaurant, in fact wherever you are.
- semantic web and artificial intelligence where all information is categorized and stored in such a way that a computer can understand it as well as a human. The web will be capable of analyzing data and extrapolating new ideas for you.

- three dimensional web - one single virtual world with buildings, shops and other areas to explore and people to interact with in virtual reality and real online personalities. However, standards for programming and graphical design would be much more complex and expensive.
- above or some combination thereof.

Web usage

So what will the backroom developments mean for what we do on the web? Well, [Seth Godin](#) has characterised these next developments as:



- ubiquity – because it is about activity, not just data, and most human activity takes place offline
- identity – because the deliverable is based on who you are and what you do and what you need
- connection - because 'you're nothing without the rest of us'.

We are already seeing some of these changes with the growth of social media and the launch just recently of [Google Sidewiki](#) – a new feature of the Google Toolbar that lets you leave comments about any website. When some else running Sidewiki views that web page, they'll see your comments.

But in the future Godin sees much more potent applications. He gives examples of how this will work too, examples such as:

- I'm typing an email to someone, and we're brainstorming about doing a business development deal with Apple. A little window pops up and lets me know that David over in our Tucson office is already having a similar conversation with Apple and perhaps we should coordinate.
- I'm late for a dinner. My GPS phone knows this (because it has my calendar, my location, and the traffic status). So, it tells me, and then it alerts the people who are waiting for me.

Some of this is not so far away. Google Wave has just launched and has a lot of features, such as:

- Real-time: In most instances, you can see what someone else is typing, character-by-character.
- Extensions: Just like Facebook developers can build their own applications within waves. Google Wave code will be open source, to promote innovation and adoption amongst developers
- Wiki functionality: Anything written within a Google Wave can be edited by anyone else

- Playback: You can playback any part of the wave to see what was said.
- Drag-and-drop sharing: Drag your file and drop it into a Google Wave and everyone will have access.

The [Social Issues Research Centre](#) says that the web in 2020 will:

".....meet human needs more fully than it does at present, with many resulting social and political implications. It will have come to provide a renewed forum for social cohesion and democracy as well as continuing as a platform for information, entertainment, communication, shopping, etc. If a Web application, however complex and sophisticated, does not fulfil a timeless human need then it will not succeed. While technology changes, people in general do not..... We reinvent tribal groups in which we find a true sense of belonging, whether they be the familiar youth subcultures..... or the more staid and respectable..... 'grown-up' groups with which we are so familiar..... As basic mechanisms for bonding and social cohesion are eroded in the faceless anonymity of modern towns and cities, we re-create new means for satisfying our timeless needs. In this sense, nothing changes much apart from superficial style. The Web increasingly serves such needs, allowing us to establish and maintain the same social bonds....."

Hence [Marshall McLuhan's](#) Global Village becomes truly real and as [Jeremiah Owyang](#), says: "people connect to each other – rather than institutions..... Consumers will rely on their peers as they make online decisions, whether or not brands choose to participate..... The community will take charge and that's going to happen whether or not marketers or brands participate..... Social networking will only continue to facilitate the power shift toward the consumer."

The crucial thing about all of this is that it completely changes the dynamic. For many years now the dynamic has been biased towards companies. As examples, branding and price promises have been two of the ways that companies have been able to maintain profitability whilst 'reassuring' consumers, i.e.

- The purpose of any brand is to undermine the homogeneity of products so that pretty much indistinguishable items – whether cola or lager or denim or something else – have a substantially different value because they are marked with the label 'Coca' or 'Pepsi' or 'Virgin' or 'Carling' or 'Heineken' or 'Budweiser' or 'Gap' or 'Levi' or 'Top Shop'. The advertising industry is dedicated to establishing consumer preference for one brand or another. This provides companies with increased profitability.
- With the 'range' of goods currently available how could we possibly know about all of them or what they are worth? Our knowledge of the market and its goods is far from perfect, hence advertising campaigns offering that 'If you find it cheaper elsewhere, we'll refund twice the difference'. Clearly, if you had perfect information you would know it was cheaper somewhere else to start with and, if you wished to 'maximise your utility' buy it there. This also provides companies with increased profitability.





In the social web market where much more perfect knowledge may exist (like small towns in 1750) then will brands that are really 'just commodity products' be able to exploit these situations?

Maybe, but it will take a significant change in attitude from top down to bottom up thinking, thinking which REALLY puts the consumer first ('ask not what your community can do for you - ask what you can do for your community') and not the CEO's pay package.