

How to Use The Internet to: Improve Service, Streamline Communications and Bring you Closer to your Clients

This concise overview gives practical ways for an accountancy firm to use their website to improve service, streamline communications and get closer to their clients. In our increasingly connected age people are increasingly looking to the Internet to help them communicate effectively. In a few short years¹ the world wide web has changed the way we do business, enabling businesses to extend the way they work by allowing interaction between the company and anyone with a web browser. People now expect a website to be more than an online brochure.

As an organisation our focus is on serving accountants and their clients. The origins of this How To guide are rooted in the many discussions we have had with accountants². There are several common problems that are raised by accountants which we will address:

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| Eliminating data transfer | Every firm has clients that keep records using an accounting system. They send a backup of their system to the accountant (perhaps for management or statutory accounts to be prepared). When the accountant has finished the work they send a backup of the modified system to the client. Often the client does not incorporate the changes made by the accountant, resulting in additional work in the future. |
| Avoiding email | Firms are becoming increasingly nervous about emailing confidential information to clients. With no guarantees of security, or even of delivery, email is considered insecure, undesirable and unreliable. |
| Ensuring security | Where information is made available on the web, either to others (for example when using an offshore service provider) or even to clients, there are concerns about the security of that information. |
| Distributing information | Accountants are 'knowledge professionals' and for many of their clients will be the most trusted advisor that they have. Accountants want to be able to provide relevant information to their clients in an easily accessible form, to add value to the service that they provide. |
| Organising records | Every firm has clients who do not keep adequate records. This means that additional work is required to organise the records and for many firms this means that they end up carrying out additional work which the client is reluctant to pay for and does not value. |

We will look at each of these areas in turn with suggestions for how appropriate use of the Internet and web based services can overcome the problems.

Eliminating Data Transfer

This is an issue for an increasing number of firms. It makes a great deal of sense for the accountancy function of a business to be carried out partly by the client and partly by their accountant. Most clients will run the sales ledger and cash book themselves. For a large number of clients they want proper management accounts but do not have staff that can prepare them. Wherever you draw the line in terms of which of functions are carried out by which party you both need access to the same system.

The Online50 service provides access to a range of standard software, including accounting software, in a secure environment branded to your practice. It allows you and your clients to work on the same software at the same time from different locations. To fully discuss the Online50 service is beyond the scope of this paper, but for more information please see www.online50.net or call 0800 195 0835.

Avoiding Email

Email is not a secure system. Not only are there potential problems with the delivery of documents, but the contents of the documents are available to every mail server, and possibly every Internet router³, that the email passes through. Of course messages and attachments could be encrypted

and/or password protected but this is not usually the case. To password protect documents and/or encrypt emails requires user interaction and co-operation.

By providing a secure location for client confidential documents you can easily avoid having to email confidential documents to your clients. However, not all implementations of a 'secure folder' are truly secure. Please see below for more information on our Secure File eXchange (SFX) which has been designed from the ground up to offer the highest levels of security.

Ensuring Security

When you are sharing information with other people using the web you must make sure that the information is only accessible to the people who should have access to it. There are a number of factors that you must consider regarding security including:

Who has control	If you do not have control over the system that is providing the access to users can you be sure that the system is properly setup? For example many overseas outsourcing companies will provide an FTP server that you can upload to. Who controls what documents users can see? Who controls which users can access the service?
Who has jurisdiction	When using an Internet based service, which courts have jurisdiction over the service? Does the authority with jurisdiction have adequate privacy laws? Are the servers located in a territory which is within the same jurisdiction that governs the contract? Is the jurisdiction accessible to you in terms of being able to access legal representation and advice?
Evidence of security	How can the provider demonstrate an appropriate approach to the security of your clients information? For example do they have accreditation to relevant standards such as ISO 27001 the international standard for information security.

As a service provider accredited to ISO 27001 we believe it is essential that you use a service where you can control which users can see what information, that the contract is governed by local law and where the servers are located in the same country.

Distributing Information

Finished documents (such as management or final accounts) are not the only information that you want to provide to your clients. As their trusted advisor clients will want to be able to access relevant information from you, when they want it. Depending on the size of your firm you may have several areas of specialist expertise – this is an important asset that you want to make best use of both in terms of winning new clients and maximising your revenue. It is therefore sensible to make more of your clients and potential clients aware of issues that arise in your specialist areas.

Social networking is a key topic today and some accountants have looked at social networking tools such as Twitter and Facebook to engage with clients. As a general rule you should not use social networking sites to update your clients as there are a number of drawbacks to this. The two main drawbacks are that these sites are wrongly positioned to deliver the information your clients want and they can alienate clients who are not in these networks. One of the key issues about the positioning of the sites is that the information has relevance to the client only when they want it, not when you update it. Social networking sites are geared to immediacy, but most clients are not immediately interested in information that you have for them. Remember that successful entrepreneurs are busy running their businesses, not sitting on social network sites.

Using our SFX system you can setup interest groups and post information into these groups as frequently as you need to. You can make these areas available to the whole of the Internet, or to clients, or only to select individuals. Users can subscribe to these groups and receive an email alert when new information is posted. When users want to find relevant information they can easily search for the information on your website and only access the information that you have authorised them to find. By implementing a controlled approach to information sharing and access you can implement a specialist knowledge base, run a blog, have a discussion forum, implement an 'ask a partner' system and many other uses.

Organising Records

We have seen a number of approaches to try and solve this problem. Some accountants have tried to give their clients access to low cost (or sometimes free to the client) systems to organise their data.

The first issue to tackle with clients who do not organise their records is why the records are disorganised and this usually comes down to the clients approach to record keeping. Any client should be able to do a rudimentary level of record keeping, even if it is just using a spreadsheet. For some clients they will need to be shown how to organise their records, and perhaps given a formatted spreadsheet to help them, and then they will be able to keep the records. If your clients are in this category then you can help them. Giving them a formatted spreadsheet is very easy and will be appreciated. If you want to suggest they use a full accounting system (for example Sage Instant which has a low introductory price) they may be happy but will probably need your support. After all, if they are capable of running an accounting system, and can buy one for around £100, why haven't they done so already?

For other clients they will not keep the records because they have no interest in keeping the records. If your client does not want to keep their own records then you must either keep the records for them (and charge them appropriately), or organise their records when you receive them (and charge them appropriately) or accept that they will not keep the records and will not pay you to keep them. If you do not want to accept that they will not pay you for the work you are doing then you must encourage them to find another accountant who will accept it. You will not be able to persuade a client to keep records if they do not want to keep records and do not value having proper records.

Leveraging your Website with The Secure File eXchange

The Secure File eXchange (SFX) from Online50 provides more than a way to securely exchange files. As we have already mentioned, the SFX provides a number of ways to help you work with your clients (and potential clients) on the web. It can be used straight out of the box (although, of course, it doesn't actually come in a box!) to solve issues like those above, and can also be used as a toolkit to implement more bespoke requirements.

Giving a complete list of features and benefits of our product is not the purpose of this How To document. The purpose of the document is to give practical advice on how to leverage your use of the web. To illustrate how you can do this we are outlining three principles that we have applied to the design of the SFX and their practical implications. We hope that by understanding how something has been made better and why it's important you will then be equipped to consider if our approach is right for your needs. The three design principles of the SFX that we are covering in this document are:

Security

Core to the SFX is the security model. We designed the system from the ground up to be secure. The security is based on Access Control Lists. You decide who can access different information with a high level of control. For example you may want to make a file visible to anybody who visits your website, but not downloadable unless they have registered as a user. You will want to have areas where clients can upload files, and provide private folders for them to access their own information. You may want a client to have different folders, so that general information is in one folder but information for the owner of the business is in another. Our system of security is the most flexible and secure we have found for an online system⁴.

How is this better?

Most online security systems have a simple allow/disallow security system. You may be able to give Read Only access or Full Access depending on the user account. Some have adopted a 'role based' security model where different roles have been defined (not by you, but by the creator of the system) and users can have one of a number of roles. Our system provides a set of actions, and then defines groups of users that can perform those actions on the different parts of the system. Users can then be members of as many groups as they need to be.

Why is it important?

This allows you to have a high level of control over the information that users can access. For example you can make information visible, but not downloadable or readable to encourage visitors to your site to register. If users are not interested in a particular topic, for example Tax, they can opt out of that group and all of the related information is then hidden from them, helping them to find the information that is relevant to them. You can make information available to all users or not as you dictate.

Coupled with the security model is the publishing process. Users must be approved to actually publish information in the SFX and you decide who can do that. For example, you may want to allow any of your clients to post any comments they like against one of your newsletter articles (or anyone who reads it) or you may want to see and approve the comments before they appear. Articles and Comments can be withdrawn and so they can be shown only when relevant.

How is this better?

Some information on your site you will not want to be updatable, but other parts of the site will be updatable. For example if you want to give a particular client or a special interest group their own question and answer section then they will need to be able to post the questions and read the replies, but you don't want everyone to be able to do that.

Why is it important?

When information is published on your website you are responsible for it. You need to know about information that you would rather not be there!

Flexibility

The SFX allows you to change the look and feel of different parts of the system, and to include new functionality, by using a Custom View. This could be quite straight forward – for example changing the order in which articles appear in an online discussion or presenting a discussion in the format of your practice newsletter. However the Custom View can also include additional capabilities – for example including a document viewer on a folder containing scanned documents so that users can access the full images of the documents from the folder they have been uploaded to.

How is this better?

Custom Views mean that when you find you want to do something that's not available in the standard 'out of the box' SFX you can probably do it.

Why is it important?

By supporting Custom Views the SFX can be extended to meet a wide variety of needs, building on the security and core capabilities of the system.

Integration

The SFX is going to be part of your approach to dealing with your clients and prospective clients online. You may well have your own static website (the 'online brochure') and of course you could be using other online services such as Online50. The SFX supports integration in terms of branding, the ability to have your own URLs and supporting Single Sign On where possible.

How is this better?

Most online systems require user names and passwords to be defined in the system. Because the SFX can support users logging on by Syndication then users only need to be defined in one system.

Why is it important?

Having an integrated approach to the way clients interact with you online streamlines the process for clients and shows a more joined up approach to the way you deal with them.

Moving Forward with the SFX

To discuss how the SFX will help bring you closer to your clients, please call the Online50 team on 0800 195 0835. Our experienced team will be able to explain the capabilities of the system and discuss how it can be used to meet your requirements.

Pricing for the SFX is very competitive. For an existing Online50 partner accountant it's free of charge. For accountants who are not Online50 partners a modest monthly fee applies. If you use more than your storage allowance then additional storage is charged for under our flexible storage tariff. This allows you to pool your storage allowances from all of the services you take from us and use the storage wherever you need it – only the overall excess is charged for. As with all of our hosted services it's available on calendar monthly terms.

Getting started is straight forward and can help you stay closer to your clients. With attractive terms and pricing using the SFX is an easy decision to take, and a powerful system to use.

¹ The first web server came online on 6th August 1991. It was deployed at CERN (the European Organisation for Nuclear Research). The Google search engine started as a research project in 1996 and the company was incorporated in 1998 with an IPO in 2004. In the same year (2004) the term 'Web 2.0' became popular when O'Reilly Media and MediaLive hosted the first Web 2.0 conference. Their definition was of the 'Web as Platform' where software applications are built on the web, rather than for a desktop computer.

² The Online50 service is mainly provided to accountants who sign up as an Online50 partner firm and offer the service to their clients. Not only do we provide a range of online services for accountants but in our role as a partner of the UK200 group our Chief Executive chairs IT Forums for member firms where their current IT issues are shared and compared.

³ As the Internet has multiple routes between different points it is possible that an email sent from one mail server to another would be divided up and sent along different paths. If all of an email message is passed along the same route then the contents of the email could be reassembled and accessed from any of the points through which it passes. You can see the number of routers that data passes through using the 'traceroute' command.

⁴ If you find a security system that's more flexible and more secure please let us know!