

# Convers(at)ion

BY KERRY SWIFT **in** Munich

**M**UNICH in Spring is a most unlikely place to discover the 21st century, but the quiet-spoken and somewhat diffident guy sitting opposite me is already living in the next millennium.

John Richmond is one of those itinerant Anglo-Saxons one tends to find exploring new frontiers, be they mountain peaks or, as in this case, intellectual property. Richmond, you see, develops and sells ideas for the Internet, some of which promise to change the entire way in which the world does business. He is a leading missionary for the new technology and I sought him out because there's nothing quite like a Damascus Road revelation to get the old enthusiasm going again.

Munich is renowned for its beer and, in the spring, its fresh white asparagus basted in butter sauce are unparalleled. Thus fortified we set out for BMW AG's head office where, as electronic ideas merchant and consultant, John Richmond is preparing a vision of a Brave New World for BMW.

To get a sneak preview of that world, he takes me into the bowels of the building where he has been fine-tuning an Internet presentation for the BMW AG board of directors for months. This is a fantastic compilation of electronic wizardry which he hopes will convince the great men (there are no women at that level in Germany) that they are taking a privileged peep into the future.

The next step, of course, will be to get the great men to put up the money to turn vision into reality. The sum being mentioned is a R5.8 billion, serious money in any language.

The great men, you see, are sceptical about the Internet—most people who don't use it are—but there are some who have grasped the marketing potential of the Internet and, in this case, one of them happens to be the boss. When the geschäftsführer shows interest in something, everyone gets interested. The world may well be changing, but not in its essentials.

Bernd Pischetsrieder believes in the potential of the Internet because, among other things I am told, his son believes in it. This fact alone, makes him a wise man for, as the old Indian proverb has it: "Listen to your children if you wish to hear the future."

This is why John Richmond has been preparing this presentation over the past few months because, like the chairman of BMW, he sees what the future holds.

I was privileged to glimpse that future in previewing John Richmond's presentation to the BMW board. Every vehicle manufacturer's Internet pages get projected up onto screens

strategically placed around the room with the centrepiece, of course, being the experimental BMW web site—an example of comparative advertising at its best.

And the object of all this electronic activity? To get the board to develop intranet and Internet links for BMW worldwide—the intranet for instant internal communications and the Internet to do what the company does best—selling cars. The former will link up the world of BMW, while the latter will link the world to the company and its products.

Both are projected as being vital to the future strategic advantage of the company, but it is the Internet vision that is the most spectacular because it could change the way the company, and indeed the whole motoring industry worldwide, does business forever.

The vision is that using this technology, anyone, anywhere in the world will be able to order their vehicle via the Internet. The days of the brick-and-mortar showroom in every city high street would come to an end. All the customer need do is make a local phone call to an Internet service provider, access the manufacturer's local web site and order a car.

The customer sees the vehicle on screen and orders whatever custom bells and whistles required. As each new feature is added—blue leather seats, cherry-wood dash, CD player, climate control, real blow-up rubber doll—the on-screen vehicle changes accordingly. So does the total price of the vehicle. Better still your monthly repayments are tracked according to the ruling interest rates as each custom accessory is added.

For the manufacturer this means potentially billions of dollars in savings worldwide. For the customer, it means experiencing the joys of building a vehicle of choice in the comfort of one's own home with all the finance/insurance details being calculated as you construct your order.

Now the customer can literally cut his coat according to the available cloth. And, once the order is processed and cleared, the customer can use the Internet to follow the building of the vehicle as it moves through the various stages of production in the factory. As Keith Floyd would have it: "Brilliant!"

It will be even more brilliant when Internet technology becomes available on the home television screen which, of course, is the next mass consumer step forward. There's no doubt about it, the world is getting wired at a speed that takes your breath away.

This is the world that missionaries such as John Richmond are promoting and the fact is we are not that far from ordering whatever we want off our television screens which, in time, will be the conduit to the world-wide shopping

and informational mall. It is not something governments favour, of course, because they will not be able to control the flow of money.

In South Africa things are not standing still in this direction either. There is a great deal of creative activity concentrated on the Internet.

Despite its geographic location and its long years of political isolation, South Africa has stayed abreast of Internet technology.

Indeed, says Peter Blum, board member of the International Association of Business Communicators Southern Africa (IABC): "South Africans are technology mad. Look at the proliferation of cell phones and the explosion of DTP technology. But the bottom line is that we had no choice. The result is that we have some extremely innovative players on the Internet."

A good example of that local entrepreneurship comes from a link-up between the photographic agency, Southlight in Johannesburg and PictureNet, which makes photographs available on the Net. Southlight, representing a number of local photographic sources, provides the photographs. PictureNet then processes them to provide ready-to-print, scanned, full-colour news and advertising images on the Net for local and international subscribers. Subscribers simply search the PictureNet archive and download the images of their choice.

Naudé van der Merwe is a guiding light behind PictureNet and a director of Aztec, one of the leading and most user-friendly service providers on the Net. He believes that while local propellerheads are doing interesting things, big business needs to get wired up fast, warning that unless South African businesses gets fully on board the Internet, they will fall behind and wither on the vine of international commerce.

"Businesses around the world are investing billions on Internet solutions for marketing and communications. Unless local businesses get wired, they will simply become Third World spectators."

It is the view being advanced by all the Internet missionaries because they know that those companies which deliver the most accurate and up-to-date information to the market and which can respond fastest to market needs, will be the big winners. And the Internet makes this instant informational flow possible.

It is impossible, having spent time with the missionaries and seen what the Internet is capable of doing, to disagree with them. I have seen the future and I like what I see. Indeed, Munich in the spring is a splendid place. The beer and asparagus aren't bad either!

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