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3Com paves the way to resellers with XML

By Matthew Nelson
InfoWorld Electric

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3Com -- in what could be the first move by a major company to use Extensible Markup Language (XML) on its Internet-commerce Web site -- has added increased functionality and connections to its partners that also use XML, and in so doing may have solved a problem facing product vendors and resellers.

Although XML is still officially in development, 3Com and its resellers, Insight and CDW, decided to use the language because of its capabilities. The company spent about four months reworking its I-commerce Web site to accept and use XML, which is used to transfer customer orders and information to the channel partners' I-commerce sites.

"XML, as a new format, gives you the same benefits as a database," says Susan Fischer, manager of e-commerce and communications at CDW Computers Center, a direct marketer of computer products in Vernon Hills, Ill. "This is something that you can't get with HTML."

Customers now can fill an online shopping cart at 3Com's site and transfer that information automatically to a channel partner of their choice. Previously, customers needed to re-enter product information once they had connected to the partner's site.

"With XML, we are able to move over information about that user, plus information about the products that user is interested in purchasing, and the reseller can respond about what is in their shopping cart and all of the products they want to buy, showing their price and availability," says Fergus O'Reilly, manager of I-commerce software development at 3Com.

"It's going to make it easier for the customers," says Todd Sullivan, a Web developer at Insight, a computer hardware and software supplier and 3Com channel partner, in Tempe, Ariz. "It's a new technology that no one that I know of is really using in the e-commerce world."

The use of XML to create seamless connections between two I-commerce sites may do more

than streamline a customer's shopping experience -- it may alleviate mounting tensions between resellers and companies that wish to sell their own products on their own Web sites, analysts say.

"The Web has posed a big challenge to companies that sell indirect but also want to sell on their own Web site," says Ira Machefsky, vice president of the Giga Information Group, in San Jose, Calif. "This [3Com's use of XML] would not just be technology trailblazing but would be e-commerce channel management trailblazing as well."

3Com plans to expand the transfer of information between partners to include real-time inventorying, the capability to add products to a shopping cart regardless of a customer's site location, and basic sale information.

"We're sending this shopper on our site over to our partner's Web site, and we'd obviously like to know if they made a sale," O'Reilly says. "With this technical information in place, we can get that information back from those vendors."

"If you have a real-world problem that you can solve, you can solve it with XML," O'Reilly says. "It is possible to deploy solutions today using XML."

3Com Corp., in Santa Clara, Calif., is at http://www.3com.com.

Matthew Nelson is a reporter for InfoWorld.

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