

Brave new tech: the next 10 trends for SMEs

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Brad Howarth

With estimates suggesting that up to 40% of Australian small businesses do not have a website, it is natural to assume that many are wary of web-based technology.



But as we move to an era where more consumers are transacting online via high-speed wired and wireless networks, technology could provide many businesses with the edge they need to compete in an increasingly globalised market.

Many of the bigger businesses they compete with have also been slow to take their businesses online, but that doesn't afford SMEs the luxury of sitting back.

It is becoming increasingly clear that in a web-enabled society competition does not come just from domestic companies, but from technologically-advanced international players as well.

The good news is that the cost of web-enabling an SME need no longer be prohibitive, thanks to the plethora of open source tools and online outsourcing services available. Many of the technologies that are coming to the fore today are also based on a long history of development, meaning that businesses can take fewer risks while keeping on the leading edge.

In developing the book *A Faster Future*, numerous technology trends presented themselves as potentially benefitting SME businesses. We've gathered up 10 of the most prominent here, along with comments from some of the web's most prominent thinkers, to help you prepare for your own faster future.

The internet of things

According to the communications technology giant Ericsson the number of internet-connected devices in the world will swell from five billion in 2010 to 50 billion in 2020. That massive leap will be accounted for by rapid growth in machine-to-machine communication, as everything from cars to vending machines become connected to the internet and capable of receiving information and sending real-time updates. This has ramifications for everything from managing better traffic flow to ensuring that ATMs and vending machines are never out of stock.

"Everything that can benefit from being connected will be connected." – Ericsson senior vice president and chief technology officer [Håkan Eriksson](#).

Instant gratification

Online consumers expect things to happen immediately – be it downloading music, buying an airline ticket or transferring money. The internet has swept away many of the time-consuming barriers to commerce. Customer service is increasingly being measured in terms of a business's ability to quickly complete a transaction and then deliver.

It is one thing that Australian SMEs can fall back on when competing with cheaper offshore rivals – no one outside Australia can deliver as quickly as a local company.

"It's the ability of being able to get hold of what you want absolutely instantaneously." – Telstra chief technology officer [Hugh Bradlow](#).

Moving beyond people

Good customer service is as essential online as off, but providing a dedicated team to handle every online query can be taxing. Artificial intelligence (AI) technology such as that offered by MyCyberTwin gives businesses the opportunity to program online 'personalities' that can answer queries for customers in a pleasant and courteous manner. CyberTwins never get sick, take holidays or lose their temper, and their answers are always consistent.

"Most interest has come from really large companies who have some very distinct customer needs that they are not meeting adequately." – MyCyberTwin cofounder and chief executive officer [Liesl Capper-Beilby](#).

Weightlessness

The music industry has been the victim of piracy for decades. But it wasn't until the physical component of the product was discarded by consumers, ie, the CD and its casing, that piracy became rampant. Suddenly everyone could be a pirate or acquire pirated goods without leaving their desk. Throughout the last decade the same phenomenon also hit the film and television industry. Others are now bracing for the same impact. As the cost of manufacturing around the world decreases, many organisations are realising that their true assets are not their products, but the information that resides within them – particularly their brands and their relationships with their customers.

"Every business is going to go through the same thing that happened to the media business; the same massive, dislocating transformation." – Los Angeles-based digital media legend [Robert Tercek](#).

Video everywhere

If you are not already incorporating video into your website, you should be. Businesses around the world are realising that consumers are willing to pay more attention to a 30 second video than to a page of text. Product demonstrations and how-to videos are popping up across the web thanks to companies such as Brightcove. YouTube and other services make it easy to host large libraries of video online content, while the cost of the equipment

for making them has plummeted. What is still needed however are skills in storyboarding and shooting.

"We'll see more proliferation of that content type and users not being able to use any internet site or application without video being a part of it." – Brightcove founder and chief executive officer [Jeremy Allaire](#).

Context-aware computing

This one is a little further out, but you can get a sense what is possible with location-based services such as foursquare. Because you have told foursquare your location, nearby service providers can use that piece of contextual data to make an offer to you. Over time contextual services might also make use of your diary to factor in what you are doing at any given moment and tailor services accordingly, or even have awareness of your likes and needs and alert you when you are in a convenient position to complete a task, such as buying milk on the way home from work.

"We are collecting all this great data about what people are doing, what their interests are, what they are liking and what we might be able to recommend to them." – foursquare co-founder [Naveen Selvadurai](#).

Beyond the mouse and keyboard

Get ready for a new generation of computer interfaces that are more about gesture and touch rather than point and click. Touchscreen smartphones and devices such as Microsoft's Kinect for Xbox (a sensor that allows you to control the console by waving around your hands and other body parts) will lead to a whole new language of interaction that may be much more natural than banging out words onto a tiny keyboard. You can also expect to see devices such as Emotiv's EPOC that relay instructions directly from the brain.

"There's going to be a combination of all of these mechanisms that will converge, that will make our interactions a lot more compelling and a lot faster." – Emotiv president [Tan Le](#).

Data is everything

Almost every time you look at a commercial webpage, someone knows about it, and someone else wants to profit from it. The anonymous gathering of user browsing habits has become a multimillion dollar business for companies such as BlueKai, as advertisers pay to get information about users whose browsing history indicates they may be more predisposed to whatever it is that they are offering. While a debate rages about the ethics of anonymously tracking consumer behaviour, today it is the added spice that enables content creators to maintain ad yields, and is keeping much of the Internet free to view.

"We believe that data is becoming more valuable than media." – BlueKai founder and chief executive officer [Omar Tawakol](#).

Collaboration

The web provides a host of tools that enable small businesses to link together with partners, suppliers and each other to increase their size. Online collaboration tools such as Cisco's

Webex and Citrix' GoToMeeting are letting SMEs put together virtual teams that are not restricted by each member's location, giving them access to skills and resources they might not otherwise have been able to find. These same tools are also enabling businesses to cut back on their travel budgets, particularly new high-definition videoconferencing systems that are starting to reduce the credibility gap between a screen-based conference and actually being in the same room together.

"Terms like remote working are going to go away, because it's not going to matter where you work." – Citrix Online Asia Pacific managing director [H.R. Shiever](#).

Economies of scale

Not so much a tech trend, but an overriding factor in online market economics. Put simply, as more people transact more services online, the cost of providing those services diminishes. Two seemingly immutable trends are that there will be more people transacting online tomorrow than there are today, and the cost of technology (particularly software and hosting) is becoming more affordable.

For those SMEs that use the internet to expand their footprint globally, their customer base subsequently scales exponentially.

"Tipping points come when there are sufficient people who are party to some new functionality. When the value becomes significant then you see a rapid uptake of the particular technology." – Father of the internet and vice president and chief internet evangelist at Google [Vint Cerf](#).

Brad's new book, *A Faster Future*, is available from www.afasterfuture.com.