

Internet Waves – July/August 2001
Alphabet Soup: Acronym Round-Up

By

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The natural human response, upon encountering a passel of acronyms that are unfamiliar, is flight or fight – zoning out or faking it. Alas, neither is a viable option for the information professional...who may very well be in the position of researching UDDI, Ipv6 or ebXML on behalf of a client/patron/customer. This happens to me a fair amount...suddenly, I need to become an instant expert on something like W-CDMA in order to support not only eCompany Now's writers, but also the readers of our magazine and the users of our Web site.

If you follow the mainstream media superficially, you may be left with the impression that the Internet is all but dead as far as business is concerned. But you'd be dead wrong. What's moribund is the glitz and the frivolity. Economic Darwinism has all but weeded out the dotcoms with ludicrous or non-existent business plans. But the place of the Internet in the mainstream business world is a veritable juggernaut. E-business is not only alive; it is thriving, due to the cost savings and efficiencies it makes possible.

And that's why there are so many "new" acronyms and abbreviations. For your summer reading pleasure, I've rounded up a selection of those you might want to know about, since it looks like they're going to be with us as the march of global e-commerce progresses. I'll do my best to tell you what each one means, what its significance is, and where you can go to find out more about it.

- **3G (Third Generation Wireless):** The current state of the wireless Internet is s-l-o-w. OK for text-based e-mail and truncated, stripped-down Web sites -- if your eyes are good enough to read from those awful little screens. 3G promises, among other things, higher speed and bandwidth. The Swedish wireless phone company Nokia, envisions the following (<http://www.nokia.com/3g/whatis.html>):
 - *3G is videoconferencing in a taxi.*
 - *3G is watching clips from your favorite soap in the train.*
 - *3G is sending images straight from the field to headquarters for analysis.*
 - *3G is sharing your Moroccan vacation with your friends -- from Morocco.*

This all sounds very cool, but it ain't here yet, folks. First of all, in Europe, telecom providers wildly overpaid at auction for the appropriate slices of the wireless spectrum. And everyone is realizing how much it's going to cost to build out the networks, etc. The great unknown is whether consumers are actually going to want it...and even if they do, whether it can be priced

affordably enough to attract enough users to make it profitable. 3G Newsroom (<http://www.3gnewsroom.com/>) is a good place to go for general background information, technical reports, white papers, and current news stories about 3G.

- **CDN (Content Distribution Network):** This is evolving as the preferred acronym, although you'll also hear terms like Internet Content Distribution, Internet Content Delivery Services, Content Caching, and so forth. A very simple explanation of what's going on here is that someone – usually an independent service provider like Akamai (<http://www.akamai.com/>) or Digital Island (<http://www.digitalisland.com/>), the two leaders in this space – sets up a distributed network of servers, often globally, with critical and/or frequently accessed Internet content stored on each. The goal is to streamline content delivery to the end user – e.g., you. Major content providers are the obvious customers; Digital Island provides its services to a long list of companies from Apple Computer to ZDNet, likewise, Akamai's clients include an extensive roster ranging from Abercrombie & Fitch to Yahoo. For more information, you can prowl the Akamai or Digital Island Web sites, or check out CDN Week at Stardust.com (<http://www.stardust.com/cdnweek/index.htm>), which offers news, features, resources and commentary on content delivery networks, updated every Monday.
- **DRM (Digital Rights Management):** Digital rights management software is used to facilitate secure distribution of commercial (paid) content over the Web. Yeah, yeah...as information professionals, we all know that copyright laws apply to online content, but let's face it -- policing this stuff is an impossible job. DRM keeps people from poaching the stuff in the first place. Various technologies and combinations thereof are employed in DRM systems – the server and (client) plug-in approach being one of the more common. However, if a system is too complicated, it will be shunned by users. Some civil libertarians see a downside to DRM, in that it will likely result in reduced privacy and anonymity. For a good overview of DRM, see *Preventing Content from Being Napsterized* in the May issue of The Digital Edge (http://www.digitaledge.org/monthly/2001_05/copyright.html). For an overview of the flip side, see the essay by John Gilmore of the Electronic Freedom Foundation, *What's Wrong With Copy Protection* (<http://www.toad.com/gnu/whatswrong.html>).
- **ebXML (Electronic Business XML):** This is a joint project of the United Nations body for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business Information Standards (UN/CEFACT) and the Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards (OASIS) to use XML (eXtensible Markup Language) as a standard for the secure interchange of business data. Backing this initiative are some 75 companies, including major IT vendors and trade associations throughout the world. The focus of the initiative is on business processes (shipping a product, delivering a service) rather than business documents (purchase orders, invoices). Home base for the ebXML project is <http://www.ebxml.org/>, where a detailed explanation, white papers, FAQs, etc., may be found. For a briefer, lucid explanation, see *ebXML: Not Just Another Acronym* at JavaWorld. (<http://www.javaworld.com/javaworld/javaone00/j1-00-ebxml.html>)

- **GPS (Global Positioning System):** OK, so this isn't new. Heck, for less than \$200 these days, you can get a pocket-sized GPS that will let you navigate with the kind of satellite-based precision once available only to the military. High-end cars are beginning to show up with built-in GPS. And pretty soon, the technology will be coming to your cell phone, which is why I included it in this list. The FCC's Enhanced 911 Initiative (<http://www.fcc.gov/e911/>) mandates that by October of this year, wireless carriers must be able to geographically locate a caller's position within 125 meters. From a public safety point of view, this is a no-brainer. From a privacy view, however, it can be somewhat worrisome, according to Richard Smith of the Privacy Foundation, in *E911: Big Brother's Tracking System* (<http://www.privacyfoundation.org/commentary/tipsheet.asp?id=23&action=0>).

Meanwhile, certain elements in the private sector would like to piggyback on this whole scenario to offer you something called location-based M-commerce. In other words, wireless promotions and coupons could also soon be on their way to your cell phone. Wired explains what this is all about in *Consumer Coupons Going Mobile* (<http://www.wired.com/news/business/0,1367,37577,00.html>). Incidentally, if you're interested in a good background on GPS itself, check out The Aerospace Corporation's GPS Primer (<http://www.aero.org/publications/GPSPRIMER/>).

- **IPv6 (Internet Protocol version 6):** The most glaring problem with IPv4, the current standard for Internet protocols, is that it can accommodate only four billion unique Internet addresses (e.g., the numerical addresses that underlie the Internet routing structure). While four billion may sound like plenty, experts tell us that it's only a matter of time before the Internet runs out of unique addresses. After all, it's not just computers that are connected these days. Your smart phone, your PDA...and, eventually, maybe even your refrigerator will all require a unique IP address. (Although if a teenage boy lives in your household, having a refrigerator that sends you an electronic message when its contents are growing meager is redundant, to say the least.)

IPv6 is the replacement standard, waiting in the wings since 1997, but under more or less constant development by the Internet Engineering Task Force. Whereas IPv4 uses a 32-bit binary numbering scheme for its addresses, IPv6 boasts a 128-bit hexadecimal scheme, which means, in practical terms, an unlimited supply of addresses. Not only that, but IPv6 offers some added functionality that will facilitate better transmission of bandwidth-hogging multimedia like audio and video.

Great, so let's switch over to IPv6 tomorrow. Not so fast, grasshopper. We're talking overhaul of the entire Internet infrastructure...and it's not like the Net can be shut down for a day or so to perform the upgrade. And, of course, there's the money issue – the need for corporations and other organizations which use the Internet to run out and buy heavy-duty routers and related equipment. So don't look for the switchover to happen any day now...although it's definitely looming out there as a future inevitability. The hub for information about the IPv6 protocol is <http://www.ipv6.com/>. And

NetworkWorldFusion has pulled together a collection of articles, primers and links to related sites at <http://www.nwfusion.com/research/ipv6.html>.

- **SOAP (Simple Object Access Protocol):** I had to toss this one in not just because it's a cool acronym, but because it's a rising e-business star, in tandem with its buddy UDDI, the next item on the list. It's also really, really, really geeky. If you're not intimately involved with this stuff, it's probably enough to know that (a) SOAP uses HTTP to carry messages that are formatted with XML, (b) it facilitates the creation of more ambitious Web services within the present Internet infrastructure and, (c) it is vendor- and platform-neutral. Microsoft and eBay did a deal this past spring that will make eBay's powerful automated auction capabilities available to Microsoft's developers via SOAP. Meaning, for example, that Microsoft's Carpoint (<http://carpoint.msn.com/>) could employ eBay's auction capabilities to run auctions on the Carpoint site without having to actually link to the eBay site. The XML Cover Pages provides an overview of SOAP, with related links (<http://xml.coverpages.org/soap.html>).
- **UDDI (Universal Description, Discovery and Integration):** Still with me? This one isn't as geeky as it sounds. It's simply an XML-based registry that allows businesses worldwide to more easily find each other on the Internet, and to streamline commercial transactions through enhanced interoperability. It's kind of like a white pages, yellow pages and blue pages directory all rolled into one. Businesses can list themselves by name, product, location, or Web services offered. This one's got some heavy hitters behind it; Microsoft, IBM and Arriba initiated it, and there are now some 130+ companies involved, including some of the biggest names in the corporate world, such as Compaq, American Express and Ford Motor Company. Read about the UDDI project here: <http://www.uddi.org/>; businesses can also register themselves at this site. PlanetIT has a good article, *Making Sense of UDDI* (http://www.planetit.com/techcenters/docs/e_business-e_commerce/news/PIT20001212S0027), that explains how all of this works in relatively non-technical terms.

If you purchase much shrink-wrapped software, you may have noticed that written documentation for these often-complicated products now often comes in skimpy (brochure or "quick start" card) or electronic (product help screens, PDFs on CD-ROMs) format. Personally, I can't imagine that consumer research on the part of these software companies has shown, demonstrably, that most of us prefer *not* to receive a printed, bound manual when we ante up a couple hundred bones or more for some Byzantine compilation of binary code. Obviously, it's a cost-saving strategy on the industry's part...which inevitably means inconvenience and frustration on our end. (Of course, there's always the tech support line... Hahahaha!)

Besides the software companies, of course, someone else is benefiting from this trend. Surprise! Computer book publishers appear to be flourishing -- if the tech section of my local Barnes & Noble is any indication. There is, of course, a lot of junk out there on the shelves, but some publishers deserve to be flourishing due to the high quality of their output -- like O'Reilly and Associates.

O'Reilly seems to have tapped into the current state of consumer/commercial software angst with its "Missing Manual" series (<http://www.missingmanual.com/>):

Online help is no substitute for a real manual. You can't read online help in bed, underline something, or flip between pages. And most online help lacks illustrations, page numbers, and tutorial examples.

Unlike the standard run of geeky O'Reilly titles on programming languages and technologies few "real" folks will ever use, the Missing Manual series targets popular consumer hardware and software products. They tend to be well-written, attractively designed and liberally illustrated, and they are not shy about pointing out flaws in a product...a feature you are not likely to find in a vendor's "official" documentation. See the list of titles on the Missing Manual Web site and read sample chapters online.

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