General Overview of an Extranet

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One of the most valuable and under utilized applications of the Web is an Extranet–an efficient communications link to your clients, sales force, vendors, etc. that helps you to manage the relationship. An Extranet is a secure, web-based network that is available 24/7 to connect people in your company to those who are outside of your company.

What distinguishes an Extranet from an Internet site is security and privacy. By definition, an Extranet sits behind a firewall and requires data encryption and user authentication.

The Extranet is accessible to each User through a unique password that links to a Web site that is branded and professional. What are the components that comprise the Extranet? Typically, all or some the following, depending on your needs:

- A database to hold documents, communications, digital signatures and comments
- A tool for commenting and uploading/deleting documents which may also include a document history indicating who last viewed the document, the number of times the document has been revised, etc.
- The ability to exchange data such as reports, orders, inventory status, etc.
- For a product based business, catalogs with pricing specific to a User's login
- A calendar for scheduling projects, events or meetings
- Joint access to a single software program to reduce costs for both parties
- Sharing restricted news and information in a secure environment which might also have a search function
- Automatic notification of new features or other components that have been added to the Extranet

Benefits of an Extranet include:

- Facilitate access to information by making it available 24/7
- Maintain the integrity and control of information by keeping it all in one location…no more email attachments, changing URLs, application compatibility, etc.
- Increase integrity in communications by keeping a document and it's comments in the same place
- Prevent conflicts and misunderstandings by providing an archive of correspondence
- Reinforce your brand and your professionalism by creating a virtual space with customized information
- Reduce printing costs (if you put your catalog online), while facilitating the introduction of new product and specials to increase purchases
- Reduce customer support costs by including a self-help knowledge base
- Strengthen relationships by providing relevant, customized information

Consider how an Extranet might help your company, whether you have a service or product based business. Typical implementation times run from 1 month to 1 year, depending on the required components.