



## Time to get off Information Island

You're a marketer, which means you've got information, lots of information: You have data and communications in customer lists, prospect lists, channel partner lists, social networking contacts, e-mail newsletter lists, financial data, and plenty more from partners and vendors.

*By Eric Anderson*

### **THE PROBLEM: Information Islands everywhere**

---

For many business people, all this data is living on what I call Information Islands. Excel spreadsheets, Word documents, project management plans, hard-copy printouts, post-it notes and e-mail threads are all examples of Information Islands. Unlike Survivor, these are not islands where you want to spend much time. You're more likely to collect a million dollars by leaving the island.

Why are Information Islands such a problem? Because the information you create is inherently designed to be used by one person at a time—then passed on to the next person. If you've ever handed a spreadsheet of customer information over to a colleague and said "Can you review this and forward it to so and so?" you're taking a trip to Information Island. We've all been on this voyage and dealt with the consequences—duplication of effort, outdated and unreliable versioning, slow collection of data, lack of reliable backup. You get the picture.

### **THE SOLUTION: Take control and get everyone on the Mainland**

---

#### **So what exactly is the Mainland and why should I go there?**

When your information is on the Mainland, your data is available to everyone on the project, nearly anywhere, all the time.

But for many business people, Information Islands are all they've ever known. They realize there might be a better way, but business as usual is, well, business as usual. "We just use a spreadsheet for that" or "Type it up in Word and pass it along." Does "Send an e-mail to everyone and see who replies" sound familiar?

These Island methods create more than a few issues:

- Who has the information and how accurate is it?

- Are you communicating with a consistent voice?
- Where is the information being stored?
- How is versioning being handled?
- Is the information being backed up and how often?
- What are the security ramifications?
- Are your users all using the same software?
- How do you involve customers, partners and vendors in the conversation?

What if you could address these issues, quickly and cost effectively, while improving communications? And you could do it all for a small investment

of time and money, with little need for outside help? You can do it. Here's how.

#### **Getting started is easier than you think**

The good news: Chances are you've already been on the Mainland. Maybe you spend considerable time there. Some of the better known platforms in this space are:

- Microsoft SharePoint
- BaseCamp and BackPack (from 37 Signals)
- Google Docs
- Salesforce.com
- Yahoo Groups

Internet-based services like these are changing the way we handle information.

Not so long ago, large, expensive, inflexible and difficult-to-implement systems were the order of the day—and for many large businesses they still are. But in 2008, the Mainland is a much easier place to get to. The traditional barriers of technical expertise, cost, implementation time, and end-user buy-in are lower now than they have ever been.

### **Identify the Islands that are Mainland-able**

Obviously you can't fix everything all at once. Start with a small island; let's use a typical Island-style communication on a specific project as an example.

Say you're working with a printer, a graphic designer and internal customers (the sales department) to get a direct mail piece completed. Instead of using e-mails, Word docs, spreadsheets and project management tools to herd the cats, try a web-based platform like 37 Signal's Basecamp. In literally minutes anyone can set up a drop-dead simple collaboration environment that's secure, easy to understand (that means very little training), cost-effective and—strange as this may sound—actually fun to use.

Now the big question is, how do you sell this idea in your company? Here's what's necessary to get buy-in:

### **Ease of use is the key to end-user buy-in**

Make it simple and they will come. The key to the success for many of these Mainland platforms isn't a robust feature set or infinite scalability, it's the fact that they are easy to use. I'll take an easy-to-use system with limited features I'd like to use regularly, over a complicated but feature-packed system that has features I'll never use. Ask yourself "Does this system make sense to me?" regardless of your technical aptitude.

### **Articulate the ROI to get management buy-in**

You can't run away from the numbers, so don't try. I always have my elevator pitch ready when I'm asked about a new platform or process I'm proposing. It usually goes something like this: "By using XYZ platform, I'm fairly certain we can dramatically reduce the amount of redundant conversations and mistakes we're currently having. This will save us 20-30 percent in project costs—upwards of \$2,000 to \$3,000 on this project alone."

### **Show IT that it will free them to do higher value projects**

The key here is to make sure your tech people understand that their lives are going to get easier—not harder. This is the beauty of using solutions that have been thoroughly tested, are securely hosted off-site, and require little maintenance and support. I can't emphasize the low-maintenance and support aspect enough. Often by implementing a Mainland solution you're freeing your IT people to do higher-value projects. That's what they want to do. And it's what upper management wants them spending their time on.

### **Show results at frequent intervals**

Don't be afraid to share your success in using your new Mainland solution. It's amazing how quickly users forget the old ways and difficulties of doing things and begin to focus on what's next. If you're getting projects done faster, remind people. Communications improved? Let everyone know. Happier customers? Share the feedback with everyone involved. Remind them how much more difficult these results would have been before they got off Information Island.

### **You can do it**

Changing habits is never easy, but nothing improves without change. In getting your team off the Island and on the Mainland, you're fostering habits as much as you're deploying tools. With low price points and easy implementation, these modern applications give you the luxury to be flexible. Solution A not working? Try solution B. Because it's not all about the tool. It's tackling problems in a new collaborative environment with discussion threads not e-mails; version tracking not "pass the document," anytime anywhere access to information not "I'll have to wait to get back to the office."

The benefit: a team focused on the work, not managing information. Before you know it, your entire tribe will be happily off the Island and enjoying big leaps in productivity. As Jeff Probst so often says, "Worth playing for?"

*Eric Anderson is responsible for Outsource Marketing's technology efforts. Eric joined the company in 2005. He has 15+ years experience in technology planning and support, working with companies such as Costco Wholesale, Boeing Aviation Services, Nintendo of America, and numerous small to mid-size businesses in the Pacific Northwest.*

*Eric has his Project Management Certification from Bellevue Community College. He is a certified MSDST and a member of the FileMaker Pro Solutions Alliance (FSA).*