

This article investigates the current level and nature of Internet access in Thailand and how Thai businesses of all kinds are exploiting the Net to expand their customer bases, increase profits and reach a global audience. Runs to 1107 words.

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## **Surfing in Siam**

Stroll down the hot, breezy and bustling road that runs parallel the beach in Pattaya – Thailand’s premier coastal leisure resort, and one thing you will notice is that nestled in-between the myriad bars, clubs and shops, is an abundance of Internet cafes of all shapes and sizes. They are populated at all times of the day and night by a melange of locals and Falang (the Thai word for foreigners), hunched over their glowing screens, blissfully bathing in the electron surf whilst the real, salty, wet kind beats the baking sand outside unnoticed.

On this evidence you’d be forgiven for thinking that the information superhighway has well and truly steam rolled into The Land of Smiles, joining it and it’s people to the rest of the global cyber village, and you’d be right. From humble beginnings way back in 1987, Thailand now has 16 Internet Service providers giving nationwide access to not only blurry eyed café customers but also Thai businesses large and small who, like the rest of us, have not been slow to realise the marketing potential of having a presence on the Net.

Here in the West, before the recent dot-com share plunge, the Internet was hailed as the panacea for all economic ills, the key to a massive global customer base and vast profits, regardless of the unpredictable swells and troughs of local economies. But how true is this of Thai businesses on the web, who have had to weather back in 1997 one of the world's fiercest economic tempests?

To get an idea, we posed a series of questions via email to a wide cross section of Thai businesses, from adult education schools to travel agents, to see if being in cyberspace had provided them with a safe harbour from the fulguration and given power to their propellers of prosperity.

As far as 'Marc' of the Welkom Inn in Pattaya is concerned, the answer is a resounding yes! This intimate resort complex has been on the web since 1997 ([www.elkominnthailand.com](http://www.elkominnthailand.com)) and now attracts a staggering 80% of its customers via the web. Thanks to their website a whole new market from the USA and Canada has opened up and these alone accounts for 15% of their booking. "It's been a big success," says Marc. "Even people with no intention to stay with us, are writing to tell that they liked our site."

The Pattaya School of Languages and Computers has also recognised that this is the way forward. Even with just an email address, this centre of multi- human and computer language learning tucked away in a Pattaya side street gets on average 6 new enquiries every day and now generates 2% of it's business via

the web, the majority from international clients. This may not sound like a lot but it's certainly a firm foundation on which to build, and that's exactly what they are doing. As a spokesman succinctly put it:

“ We are in the process of making (a site) because we feel it's the only way forward to improve our business.” You can find their current home page at [pattaya-info.com](http://pattaya-info.com).

If there's one business tailor-made for the Internet it's got to be travel agents for the simple reason tourists our their lifeblood and increasingly, armchair travelers are turning to the web as an easy, convenient and un-pressurised way to get the lowdown on the best deals.

NPK Travel & Tours (Pattaya) Co. Ltd. basic brochure site proves you don't need flash animation, annoying pop ups, bells, whistles and brass knobs to grab attention. Although only 2% of their business comes from the Net, 95% of that is from potential legal aliens. Their approach to the Net is both realistic and practical. No high flung expectations of hordes of mouse clickers beating down their doors, just steady growth and gratitude that any visitor stops by their site. “ I don't expect repeat visits” says Mrs. Nuansawat McMahon, “but if it brings in even a few more customers, then I fell it is worthwhile.” Contrast this, however, with our last example that proves the fantastic potential the web has for business, if your site is good and you've got something other people want to buy or information that keeps them coming back for more.

Since 1994 Utopia Asia ([www.utopia-asia.com](http://www.utopia-asia.com)) has been providing high quality, tailor made tours and travel information to a niche group of happy wanderers. A spokesman for the company told me “Being on the Internet has ensured the survival and growth of the business despite the economic downturn” A staggering 95% of their business is a result of their web presence and 72% of that is from international clients. With 3,500 visitors and 60 emails a day, their comprehensive site has caught the attention and earned the recommendation of such luminaries as Time Magazine and the BBC World Service. This welcome publicity undoubtedly contributed to the massive popularity of their site. “The brand name is now famous throughout our niche market because of the Internet,” says their spokesman. “Also, the website produces a steady, positive cash flow. So, yes, it has been a success.” But Utopia Asia is not looking to rest on its laurels. They plan to form strategic partnerships with other web niche market portals in North America and Europe to encourage further expansion.

So what conclusion can we draw for our, albeit small, survey. A very simple one it seems. For Thai business the web, to varying degrees, works and to our respondents has indeed been a port in the economic storm. Thailand is catching the wave of web revolution and could find the Net provides a valuable contribution to it’s economic re-birth.

Perhaps the only consolation one can draw from the crisis is that it happened when it did, at a time when the Internet was already firmly established in Thailand and could shield business already exploiting it from the worst effects of the downturn. Had it happened 10 or even 20 years earlier, perhaps things may have been worse. Maybe this is a lesson for those businesses still standing on the 'off line' shore holding a wet finger to the wind? Catch that current of possibility guys, time and tide wait for no man.

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