

The ALIA online shopfront

<http://shop.alia.org.au>



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If e-commerce and online financial transactions were simple, then everyone would be doing it, and every business would offer it. Whilst e-commerce has the potential to change the way that organisations operate, and how customers/clients/members interact with the organisation, it is still 'greenfields' territory, and one which has to be approached with considered circumspection and planning. Strategies, processes, people, technology, service and support have to be brought together across a wide variety of sectors. Above all, each of the systems deployed has to be secure, confidential, trustworthy and reliable. The supply chain, the financial processing, the customer handling, the underlying technology — all has to work together in a way unparalleled in most other business systems.

Secure socket layers, site certificates, encryption, merchant bank accounts, clearing services and payment processing, record-keeping, merchandise storage, inventory, handling and posting — and a host of other activities make what appears to be a simple process online much more complicated 'behind the scenes' — yet when in place and when it works, the benefits are tangible to all concerned.

When work began on the new membership database system that was launched in 2003, a significant part of the overall project was to bring e-commerce functionality to ALIANet. The first step involved offering a secure payment gateway for membership renewals, and this has been in operation since May 2003. The move from offering a method for renewing membership to a full-scale e-commerce outlet has taken a concerted effort by a number of people at ALIA National Office, and external contractors. Some pitfalls were experienced along the way (as with any complex project) but we are here today, and ready to complete the first transaction through ALIANet's online shop.

In the planning stages, we identified that the shop would have to perform a number of activities: membership applications and renewals, merchandise ordering, journals and other publications subscriptions, and events bookings and registrations. Each of these functions requires different approaches, both from a back-end perspective and from an end-user viewpoint.

At present, we offer all but events bookings and registra-

tions through the shopfront: and within eight months we hope to have events included as well. As with any sector-based Association, ALIA's membership application form is not quite as simple as filling out a lottery ticket, and the paper-based document has to allow for many options and membership types: each with certain pre-conditions and with choices that must be made by the applicant. On the web, this process can be staged and streamlined: and indeed the online application form takes half the time to work through, and much less effort to complete. Where answers to pertinent questions cannot be provided, we allow the applicant to submit a 'pending application' and leave the rest to the ALIA National Office membership team to do the rest, following up the application as required. Membership renewals are much the same: online choices take the renewal applicant through a series of questions based on responses to earlier questions — cutting the time required to complete the form in half.

Merchandise and journals are treated differently — these are items that can be bought, packaged, and dispatched with less handling at either end — consequently the shopfront has a rather different look and feel, and one which takes the buyer through a typical online shopfront process — with shopping baskets, verification of quantities and amounts, shipping details and credit card processing. Items found in the shop at present include subscriptions to *inCite*, *ALJ*, and *AARL*, and Library and Information Week posters and bookmarks. Over time, the range of products will expand.

In the future, as indicated earlier, events bookings and registrations will be handled by the same interface. Some serious programming work will be required to combine the data that sits in the existing ALIANet online Events database and the data that sits in the membership database, but this will happen — eventually. Due to the complexity of both systems, it is something that will take time to ensure that nothing breaks in the process of combination.

One last thing: a bonus for office-bearers

In <http://membership.alia.org.au/myOffices.aspx> (linked from your entry into the membership details section of the members-only site), it is now possible to list, add and remove members from your ALIA group, and also to download a member list of the group (or groups, if you are in the enviable position of being an officer-bearer for more than one group!). It is now possible, for example, to find all members who have joined since June 2004, or members who have let their membership lapse since a certain date. Postal and e-mail details of each members are available for download, too. ■

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