

Internet banking goes wireless

Handheld access could be the next financial trend
BY VICTORIA BERRY

As the financial sector gets ready to embrace the wonderful world of wireless, Canada's Hometrust Co. is racing ahead of the pack.

The Toronto-based mortgage and loan specialist has enabled its Web site to all clients to access stock, investment and rate information over their wireless devices, according to James Appleyard, vice-president to business development.

"It's allowing our site visitors the ability to download, in real time, changes in the interest rates of all of our deposit products," he said.

Hometrust was first approached by EZENET Corp., a Toronto-based company that offers software solutions for financial institutions, as well as trust and insurance companies.

Appleyard said this partnership was natural for Hometrust as EZENET provides the back-office systems for the firm's mortgage and deposit operations.

"They came to us and told us about the application. They were just launching it and we joined with them to launch our site this way," he said.

Marc Nicholas, chief technology officer for EZENET, said this was a great way for the company to launch its EZENET One Step Connectivity Platform.

"By complementing our existing back-end solutions with One Step, we can reduce development time of full-service technology and software solutions," he said. "This is like software Lego for wireless and Internet applications."

He explained that One Step will plug into and "talk" to existing EZENET legacy systems to bring them to the Web.

EZENET uses Oracle for its database technology and has incorporated a lot of Java and XML into the back office and One Step solutions.

Appleyard noted a Hometrust client who visits the Web site can go to its investment page and set up a wireless account there. "It's very simple for the client."

The Hometrust site has been up and running for two months now, and Appleyard admitted he is not surprised that the wireless function has not been very well used so far.

"This pretty cutting edge," he said. "We know that some people are using it and the system is working well. We've tested it and we're just glad to have it available."

Appleyard noted that not many of their clients will have WAP-enabled wireless devices yet.

"As a small financial institution it's important for us to be on the cutting edge of developments and not be lagging behind. We feel that having this function available to our customers will help them be more efficient in their dealings with us."

"I can't imagine that other institutions' customers will allow them not to do this kind of thing," he said.

Nicholas said the world of commerce and Internet banking is precarious.

"We don't want to put the cart before the horse. We need to keep developing viable applications that meet our customer's business objectives rather than developing applications that they cannot immediately use," he said.

Appleyard stated the major block to wireless banking is trust, which will take some time to build.