

Brendan Blake

From: Brendan Blake <brendan@erwwen.co.uk>
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To: Simon Reeves (treasurer@siophavards.cymru); 'Cliveahopper@hotmail.com'; Clive Hooper (chair@siophavards.cymru); Chris Morgan (secretary@siophavards.cymru); Jane Thomas; Hugh McCormack; 'sj.reeves38@gmail.com'
Subject: Havards - whatever happened to the "Havard Nextgen website project?"

Dear everyone,

I was astounded last Friday afternoon when Clive called me and said that Havards was about to sign a contract with a software house in Haverfordwest to produce software needed to implement click and collect. The cost is initially £5,000 (plus plugin costs) and with ongoing costs of £500 per year. (Our current on-going cost is £35 for comparison, and this includes the options of running wordpress and Woocommerce).

As the person who has produced and maintained both the website and the investment management system, and who handles pretty well all mass mailings, I was really shocked to hear this, since I had not been consulted in any way. Yet again the advisory committee has been bypassed.

I strongly advise against spending this sort of money until there has been a full review of ALL THE NECESSARY ELEMENTS OF THE INFRASTRUCTURE. This could be a huge waste of money at a time when I am told profit margins are under pressure.

A "Nextgen project" was set up a year ago to plan the future of our website and e-commerce. Yet the team has never met, **not once**. There is a good paper on the Google drive by Paul Harwood posted last December, and which can be seen here: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1qXQPGkb5e9a5kOFuW_WDTo6VA_-ZkQwrWqpCs5n_Qk/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.ihf94k9w6gon Many of the prerequisites defined in that paper are not met.

I am, I hope, qualified to assist with Havard plans for on-line shopping. As a manager in IBM's European Technical support I managed the team that provided new product introduction education and support for Retail System for several years – at a time when IBM was a major player in this field.

I also set up and ran the first ever Technical Support group in IBM Europe for Internet Technologies, and we advised many customers and even advised on the first ever successful e-commerce system using IBM hardware and software. (Opera House of Verona!) After retiring from IBM I taught on a Kingston University IT Degree Course for 10 years, including a class on ecommerce which ran for several years, as well as Internet Technologies and Networking etc. I have implemented many wordpress websites, including this one that has just gone live: <https://astronomyweek.org.uk/> (and the predecessors) – we did have other contributors, of course. I have a D.Phil from Oxford in Physics.

Back to IBM: My team also provided support for Blackwells (the Oxford Bookshop) in the 1990s when they thought they could take on Amazon. At the time Amazon just sold books and Blackwells (we thought) ought to have a good chance of capturing much of that market, in the UK at least. The Blackwells attempt was an abject failure. Not because of the computer technology developed, but because of many reasons relating to their infrastructure. In particular their inventory system proved unable to correctly predict if a book was in stock. They also discovered that even if a book was in stock, it could sometimes not be located (lying behind others on a bookshelf somewhere?) Another issue was staff training and competency in a very new process – the delivery network had problems and they could not handle the volume of dissatisfied customer queries. Once a customer had ordered from Blackwells but been let down, they never went back. Amazon won! A big loss resulted.

Now imagine what will happen if a customer orders using click and collect from Havards, makes a journey to the shop, and then fails to receive their product.

Has anyone done an independent check of the accuracy of our stock system, or the ability of staff to locate an item that we are supposed to have in stock.

There should be a considered review of any project before spending this sort of sum - as we did for the new EPOS system. Why are we not doing this.

My own view is that this is putting the cart before the horse. The idea of using multiple servers, two domains etc is not one that makes sense – it will significantly increase costs and difficulty. This is a complex project that needs proper project management.

I had already told Chris that the first phase of any project should be to convert the current website to Wordpress, and I had said I would offer to start on that when I had time.

The specification from “Modern Print Design” needs more study. I haven’t yet had enough time. It looks like a modified standard contract, and there are plenty of other places that could produce something similar. Have quotations been obtained elsewhere? Have references been taken up?

The quotation has some hidden costs mentioned, especially a plugin “AdLister”. That will increase the outlay.

Woocommerce is only one of many wordpress plugins. Some experts recommend Shopify over Woocommerce – but this hasn’t been evaluated.

I have no objection to buying in help for the website, but I cannot see that this option has been properly evaluated or reviewed. Indeed I have said to Chris that we don’t have local skills needed when I am away – which at present is most of the time.

I have a significant investment in Havards. I cannot afford to see our funds wasted and our profitability put into question.

If you go ahead and place this order, without proper evaluation, I take it as a vote of no confidence, and will have to reconsider my role in Havards.

Best wishes,
Brendan