

One hot commodity

McIlhenny's Tabasco sauce sizzles in e-commerce

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NEW IBERIA — The Internet and the latest information technology has revolutionized the way pepper sauce manufacturer McIlhenny Co. conducts its business.

"People are more Internet savvy today," said Lisa Bell, McIlhenny's director of information systems at an Iberia Industrial Development Foundation luncheon this week. "The Internet has been a marketing tool to help with our mail order marketing. Last year 569,000 people visited our site."

The family owned business, headquartered at Avery Island, began in 1868 by founder Edmund McIlhenny. Its first major sales distribution of Tabasco sauce outside of Louisiana began in the 1870's where a major nineteenth-century wholesale grocery firm, E.C. Hazard and Co., helped to introduce the product to the northeastern U.S. and beyond.

In 1987, McIlhenny began selling its products by mail order catalog. Nine years later the company launched its first Web site where customers

could order by calling a toll free number.

Today 84 percent of its mail order products, which include five pepper sauces, miscellaneous food products and Tabasco trademark clothes and accessories are purchased

by direct on-line sales. The regularly updated site features the company's history, product information with recipes, message board and chat room, music, downloadable desktop art and much more.

In the Web site's first

year, Bent Media, the advertising company who designed the site for McIlhenny, won the prestigious Addy Award from the American Advertising Federation. It has won several subsequent advertising awards.

"It's a place where people can go and celebrate the product," said Brad Brewster, founder and creative director of Bent Media. "It's modeling loosely after a New Orleans Jazz Festival."

See TABASCO on Page 2B

Continued from Page 1B

Tabasco

The company has been so successful through Internet sales that it launched its advertising campaign for its latest hot sauce on-line last year. The company's fifth sauce, Chipotle, contains a smoke flavoring and can be used as a marinade on meats.

"The number one selling



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product on-line in the country store is the hot sauce itself," Brewster said. "We put a lot of information on it to keep people coming back, and then they gravitate to the country store."

Along with a multiuse Web site, the company uses computer software to facilitate enterprise planning, promotion tracking, intracompany information sharing and on-line sales reporting. The late t

information technology has eliminated paper reports and enables sales staff to call up information by item, date, product and geographical area.

"Information was six weeks old and outdated before the sales reps got it," Bell said. "Now, the minute the books are closed for the month the information is there. It's revolutionized the way we look at sales information."

Tabasco sauce is also sold in grocery stores, restaurants,

and bars. The company also has distributorships in 110 countries worldwide, and offers information on its Web site in eight different languages. Product labels are printed in 18 different languages.

The next step is for large wholesalers purchasing McIlhenny products online.

"McIlhenny has been very good about taking its business practices online," Brewster said. "Even the vendors will be coming online and ordering."