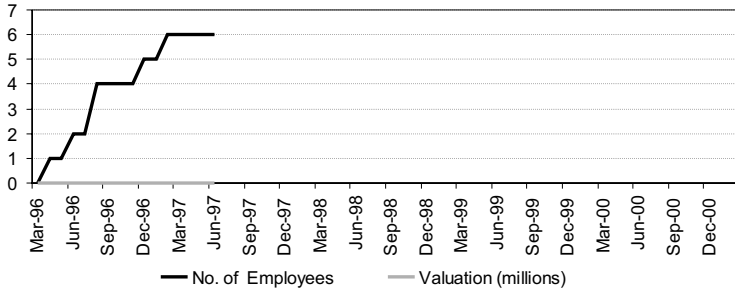


# June 1997



# The Audience



The unsatisfied customer is the most important customer.

One day, I was at home showing off the Neoforma website to my father-in-law. At the time, he was a dentist, computer-illiterate, impatient and prone to doing things the old, familiar way, unless the new way was unequivocally proven to be vastly more efficient.

Although our database had few dental products, he *was* able to find some products he used. He checked out the feature that allowed visitors to send email inquiries to vendors, but he was skeptical of its value.

“Why would I use this, if I could just pick up the phone and call a vendor, negotiate a good deal and be done with it?” he said. Then he paused for a bit, smiled and added, “Now, if I could send a message to several vendors at once—that might be a real timesaver. Can I do that?”

When I told him that we didn’t have that capability yet, he was disappointed. The ability to broadcast requests to a multitude of vendors simultaneously was a great idea. Yet I had seen nothing like it on the Web. So I sent a specification to our developer that weekend.

By the end of the next week, we had implemented the new feature. A visitor to our website could search through thousands of products, pick a category of interest, write up a message, and send it to some or all of the manufacturers of that type of product. A process that took hours previously could now be done in seconds. And we didn’t even charge for it.

We did not announce the feature when we posted it on our site. However, within ten minutes of being live, a visitor sent the first broadcast message to multiple suppliers.

By the next day, the system was being used for hundreds of messages—in ways we had never envisioned. At its peak, twenty thousand messages a week were being sent from buyers to sellers. We knew we had significantly improved the lives of many people.

I felt very good about that, even though it hadn’t been my idea.