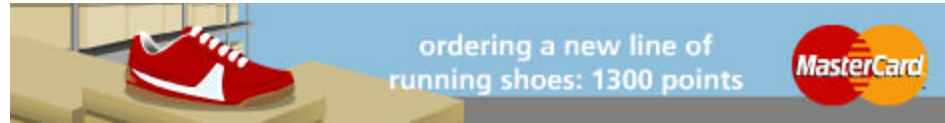


[Register/Subscribe](#)  
[Home](#)



**BusinessWeek** online

[Close Window](#)

NOVEMBER 8, 2002

ENTREPRENEUR Q&A

## How to Snare Divers? Use the Net

**Dallas scuba-shop owner Larry Dague talks about the technology that has transformed his outfit and boosted revenues tenfold**

In the scramble to make ends meet, sell new product, and manage employees, many entrepreneurs are too exhausted to recognize the goldmines right under their noses. That's what nearly happened to Larry Dague, the owner of [ScubaToys](#), a Dallas dive shop he opened in 1997. It wasn't until he was sitting on a beach in the Cayman Islands that he realized his customers might be his best assets. Dague, 44, talked recently to Smart Answers columnist [Karen E. Klein](#).

### **Q: Okay, a scuba-diving shop in Texas!**

**A:** A lot of people are surprised, but with the high-tech corridor in Dallas, the local demographics are great for divers -- and we're only two hours away from the Caribbean. There are about 20 dive shops locally.

### **Q: Wow! who would've guessed? You've mined the high-tech industry for help in growing your company tenfold over the last three years. How did that come about?**

**A:** An employee of Cisco Systems came in one day and took a class here. He liked it so much that he recommended us to some of his co-workers, and then Cisco started booking scuba trips, led by me and other staffers, as team-building events.

About that time, I was beginning to go online, and I got interested in the potential for technology in my business. I set up a Web site, and then, on a trip to Grand Cayman, I started picking a few of these Cisco guys' brains because I wanted to browse the Web and run credit-card checks at the same time, on the same phone line. My customers explained that there was a router I could buy to multitask communications in house and set up a network. I grabbed the router and started using that to kick up our online sales.

### **Q: Where did the relationship with Cisco go from there?**

**A:** These customers became some of my biggest business advocates. With their help, my Web sales started to grow. Now, the Internet brings in 80% of our business, both through online and in-store sales. Four years ago, we were a \$225,000-per-year storefront dive shop. Now we're doing \$2.2 million and we have customers all over the world.

### **Q: How, specifically, have you appealed to divers online?**

**A:** Our site doesn't feel like a typical, cold e-commerce site -- we've made the technology personal. We're real guys, with a real store -- not a virtual dive shop. We have lots of helpful content, we do education, and we put the personalities of our people right on our site. For example, we have an Ask Joe & Larry column, where divers can ask what kind of mask we recommend, or how thick a wetsuit they need for a particular dive. We make it a point to answer all the questions we get, and if they're

interesting, we post them.

A lot of companies use the Internet to take their business into people's homes. We use the 'net to bring customers into our shop. And I mean that literally -- people will see our equipment online and drive 200 miles to see it firsthand and purchase it. We also have a Web cam that shows the shop and the pool, so customers can watch scuba classes and find out they're not that scary, and they can watch us pack their orders, eat our lunches, that kind of thing. If they are interested in a snorkel, we can hold it up to the camera so they can see it for themselves. One girl was taking a scuba class and her parents were in Europe at an Internet cafe watching her lesson!

**Q: Cisco recently gave you an award. How did that come about?**

**A:** Cisco is now putting on a big push to target small business, so these guys who have been so instrumental to our growth encouraged me to apply for Cisco's Growing with Technology award. And I won! As a small-business person, I never thought to go looking for a big company to help a little guy like me. I really did it accidentally through relationships with my customers.

My conclusion is that a small businessman cannot be afraid to go out and seek that advice from the big guys. It's there for the taking.

---

Copyright 2000-2002, by The McGraw-Hill Companies Inc. All rights reserved.  
[Terms of Use](#) [Privacy Policy](#)

