GENERAL INTERACTIVE'S V.A. SHIVA HAS A VISION FOR THE INTERNET THAT BEGINS WITH E-MAIL ▪ BY ADAM KLEINER ▪ PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROCKY THIES

DR. E-MAIL

When V.A. Shiva first heard about electronic mail, he thought it had something to do with sending electric currents through paper documents. That was in 1979. Shiva was a high school junior at the time, beginning a project with Rutgers University engineers that would result in one of the world's first e-mail systems. The work won

"What we're doing is making one-to-one relationship marketing real."
– V.A. Shiva

Shiva recognition from the Westinghouse Science Talent Search and a ticket to M.I.T. It also earned him the nickname Dr. E-mail.

Today, Dr. E-mail is president and CEO of General Interactive, a company that's pioneering customer service for the interactive age. Based in Cambridge, Mass., General Interactive offers intelligent messaging and relationship marketing solutions based on a software platform called Echo-Mail. Shiva invented EchoMail after years of research in pattern recognition and classification. The software not only receives and responds to customer e-mail, it also executes outbound e-mail marketing campaigns.

In a crowded, young market for e-mail response management software, EchoMail is winning business by the boatload for General Interactive. It's also winning Dr. E-mail praise for his vision of how the Internet can be leveraged to build and maintain brand loyalty.

"Everyone is talking about relationship marketing," says Shiva, 35, whose shoulder-length hair and casual style of dress belie his stature in the high-tech industry. "What we're doing is making one-to-one relationship marketing real. For every e-mail that comes in, we slice it, dice it and understand what they're saying. For every e-mail that goes out, we're targeting it

based on what the client told us. So we're matching up client needs with customer interests."

One of the *Fortune* 500 companies that swears by EchoMail is Nike, the athletic gear behemoth based in Beaverton, Ore. Nike has used EchoMail since its Web site was launched in June 1997. Since then, with the help of EchoMail, the company has handled more than 288,000 e-mails. Without EchoMail, managing these e-mails would have required 10 full-time customer service representatives at four minutes per e-mail, says Jane Flood, Nike's director of direct marketing.

Beyond responding to some 800 to 2,000 customer e-mails each day, Nike uses EchoMail to update its audience with information of particular interest. This month, for example, runners who have visited www.nike.com and completed an online registration form will receive a New York City Marathon–related e-mail, encouraging them to run the race and visit the Nike tent.

"EchoMail receives an 'excellent' in our book," says Flood. "Shiva has great vision. He can see the big picture faster than anyone I've ever known."

Last May, for roughly 50 people who attended General Interactive's official launch party, Shiva painted

the big picture of the demand for products like EchoMail.

"We've figured out what an electronic message is," says Shiva, pointing out that the average company receives more than 700 e-mails each day, and that by 2006, the number of e-mails sent daily in the United States will exceed the number of voice calls. "Our challenge to corporate America is: Are you ready to listen?"

The market for e-mail response management software burst wide open two years ago, with no less than seven vendors competing for corporate e-mail management dollars. Companies pay between $10,000 and $500,000 for solutions of varying degrees of sophistication. The EchoMail platform is on the high end of the price spectrum, particularly versions that facilitate outbound marketing campaigns. According to Donna Fluss, research director for Gartner Group Inc. of Stamford, Conn., the success of an organization depends on whether an e-mail solution is used as a stand-alone application or wrapped into an overarching customer service platform.

"Having an e-mail service platform is valuable," says Fluss. "But having it as a component of an overall customer service environment is that much more powerful."

Fluss also says competitors in the sector may suffer from being

'A lot of what we've done is understand the laws of what an e-mail message is.'
— *V.A. Shiva*
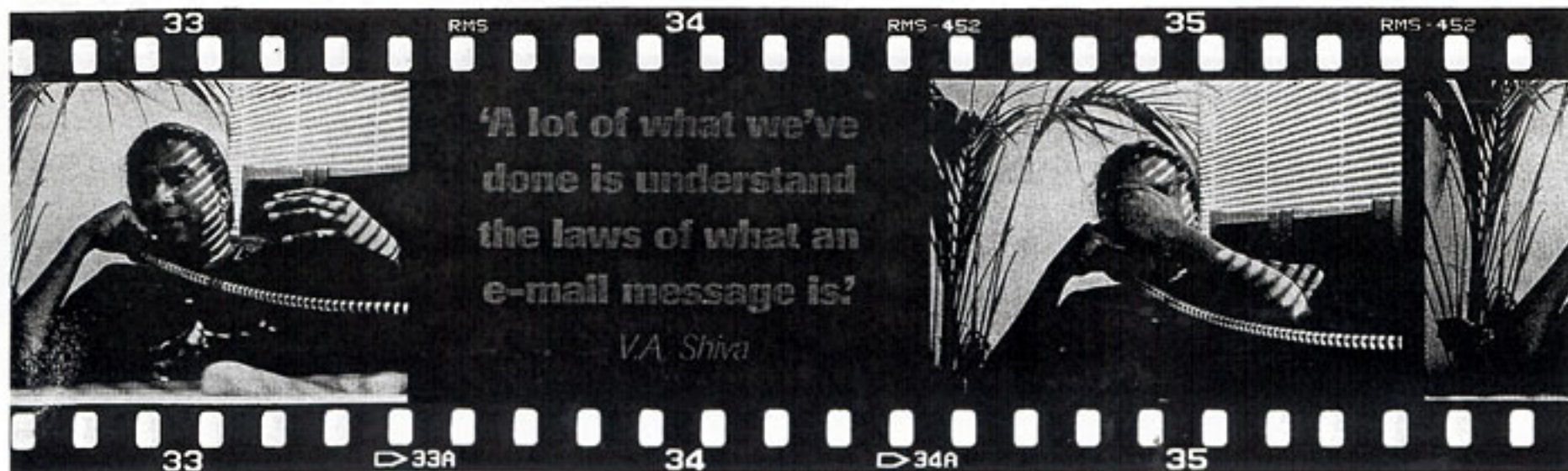
run by creative geniuses who lack formal business training. "The ability to come up with brilliant ideas is one thing," she says. "But the ability to turn the ideas into effective, viable businesses is another."

What distinguishes General Interactive from its competitors is that its official launch as "the e-mail company" came two years after Shiva had attracted his first client for EchoMail, Compaq Computer Corp. Shiva built his client base before seeking publicity because he didn't want to evangelize a product without having a demonstrated way to back it up. He wants customers who call General Interactive to have the comfort level that comes with knowing that EchoMail already has been deployed successfully.

"EchoMail helps build communities of interest and knowledge of your customer, which helps you message your brand identity in different ways," Shiva says.

Founded in 1994, General Interactive employs 85 people. The company has offices in Cambridge, Mass., Washington, D.C., and Madras, India. Shiva expects to have 90 to 100 people on board within one year, including the staff of a new office in San Francisco. He says making the company grow has been a greater challenge than anything he faced in school. Still, it's the science

of e-mail that keeps him dedicated to selling EchoMail and fostering growth at General Interactive.

"Science lets you understand the laws of something," says Shiva. "Once you understand the laws, you can manipulate them and build things. A lot of what we've done is understand the laws of what an e-mail message is. I love that from a scientific standpoint. I love pattern recognition. And I love working with these companies because I get to see all these interesting e-mail messages and take data points and make the technology better and better."

Some of those e-mail messages come from customers of IBM's telecommunications division. IBM began using EchoMail early in 1997 to manage leads generated from trade shows. The company has since incorporated EchoMail's data mining and lead generation functionality.

"Shiva has thought long and hard about e-mail, what it says and what you should do with it," says Randall McComas, vice president of telecommunications for IBM's Global Telecommunications and Media Industries. "[He's] very intense and he's very intelligent. He knows where this thing is going and can tie technical expertise to business needs."

Where is e-mail going from here? For starters, Shiva says it is not limited to text. Soon e-mail will allow people to send complete Web

pages, packed with animation and games, to alternative access devices like PalmPilots and pagers. But e-mail is only one aspect of an Internet that promises companies an opportunity for narrowcasting and taking control of their marketing campaigns.

"I think that the Internet is equal to the creation of fire or the plow," says Shiva, who has published two books about leveraging the Internet: *Arts and the Internet: A Guide to the Revolution* and *The Internet Publicity Guide.* "And I think we're at a point in human development where there's going to be significant change based on how the Internet is adopted. I think historians will look back on this era and they will see it as a major point in human history, just like from feudalism to modern-day capitalism. And I want to see how much we can push it to the hilt."

Adam Kleiner is associate editor for Continental.

E-MAIL SCIENCE

Five properties of electronic mail, as defined by Dr. E-mail, V.A. Shiva:

1. Carries attitude

2. Presents a problem or issue

3. Carries a request

4. Lets you know who the customer is

5. Lets you know what product or service they're interested in