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Sorting out securities online

James Turner

One of the places that the Internet first flexed its money-matters muscle was in the discount-brokerage arena.

By letting investors place their own buys and sells online, rather than through a human being, the Web drove down the cost of trading to the point where anyone could pick up a couple of shares of IBM without breaking the bank.

With the online-trading boom came online portfolio management, letting investors view and analyze their holdings with increasingly powerful tools.

Early on, major Internet "portal" sites like Yahoo and Netscape Netcenter learned that offering a portfolio tracker would increase their site's "stickiness" - a term referring to the likelihood that a visitor to a site will stay for a longer period of time.

But these days, plenty of sites will let you type in your holdings, and keep you up to date on your investments.

One major distinction: Some sites merely list the current prices of the securities you own, while others will track the value of your holdings and the entire value of your portfolio.

Another distinction is between sites offering delayed quotes (typically 15 minutes) and real-time quotes. Typically, real-time quotes involve dealing with an online broker like DLJdirect or Fidelity. Since many people have 401(k) or IRA accounts with a broker, they may find they already have access to these services. But for those who don't, the Microsoft Network (moneycentral.msn.com) has one of the more slick managers around.

Besides real-time quotes, it allows you to download free software that interacts with their Web site. This way, you can store your portfolio on your computer, or let the MoneyCentral site store it so you can view it from wherever you are. The software lets you view your investments with constantly updated pricing data, download account information from a collection of brokerages, and analyze investments by type or capitalization.

Money.net also has a slick Java-based real-time portfolio tracker that watches the share price of securities you own. It also gives you a ton of technical information related to your portfolio.

But you'll have to input, update, and figure out the total value of your securities by hand as there is no import facility.

You'll also have to go through a sign-up procedure that may remind you of your last mortgage closing. You need to sign several legal documents to use the real-time quote feature.

But for seamless integration of your finances, nothing beats Quicken. Start by tracking your investments

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using Intuit's Quicken 2000 personal-finance software, which costs as little as \$9.95 after rebates. Since the software can download account information from brokers such as Fidelity, you may not even have to enter your portfolio.

Next, create a personalized portfolio Web page at Quicken's Web site (www.quicken.com) and export the information from the Quicken software. Now your personalized Web page will be able to track your actual holdings and you won't ever need to manually update your portfolio again.

Even with all these fancy online tools, remember that regardless of how you monitor your portfolio, there's one thing the Internet hasn't changed: You still have to buy low and sell high.

*James Turner is a computer consultant and avid Web watcher.

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