

Trade show goes virtual

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An example of a virtual tech job fair created by Brown Smith Wallace Consulting where people can click on a virtual "booth" and find out information about a particular company.

(HANDOUT)

A St. Louis County accounting firm has a cure for the high cost of traveling to trade shows: a virtual technology fair.

Brown Smith Wallace, the area's second-largest locally owned accounting firm, is sponsoring the distribution industry's first Internet-based technology fair on Tuesday and Wednesday at www.virtualtechfair.com. Brown Smith Wallace produces an annual software guide for the distribution industry, and its consulting group advises companies that are choosing software, which can be a major

expense.

The fair will bring together software vendors and buyers from a broad spectrum of warehousing and distribution firms.

Buyers can browse a convention "floor" displayed on a website. They can read information and then talk to vendor representatives who will be staffing the virtual booths, using instant message chat, e-mail and Internet-based phones.

Visitors can listen to educational presentations from a dozen speakers -- and on their own schedule. They can ask questions and get a personalized answer. The virtual fair has attendance prizes, too.

The convention floor, speakers and other features will be available at the click of a mouse over the two-day period. The on-demand nature of a virtual fair makes it possible to attend two sessions that might have been scheduled simultaneously at an actual fair.



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Jeff Gusdorf, an accountant in Brown Smith Wallace's consulting group, said software vendors had been asking for a more cost-effective way to reach their audience.

The typical vendor spends \$20,000 on a trade show, including the cost of travel, shipping for booth displays and employees to man the booth for the duration of a show. At the virtual fair, the 25 vendors pay from \$2,500 to \$4,000 to participate.

Travel costs can limit attendance, often to just the company president or other big shots, Gusdorf said. But a virtual fair can be open to anyone with an Internet connection.

"Everybody can take an hour or two to experience a virtual trade fair," Gusdorf said. Admission is free.

The virtual fair is designed to take the hassle out of shopping for business software, Gusdorf said. Although he conceded that businesses still can go to company websites for information, that can be a cumbersome process because each site is set up differently. At the trade fair, the structure is the same for each vendor.

The fair has drawn several sponsors, including IBM, as well as partnerships with a variety of trade associations, Gusdorf said. Sponsors, vendors and the associations all are promoting the fair.

If the virtual fair is a success, Brown Smith Wallace will offer it twice a year. The company expects 1,000 people to register.