

What you first notice as you enter the building is the smell of wood, leather, and petrol. In 1895, you would have smelt chocolate, cherries and coconut. This is the building in which the world's first 'Cherry Ripe' bars were created. In 2004, you can see the signs of more than 100 years of history in the building. Towards the back you see a few broken windows. In places, the hardwood floor is more than well-worn, it's worn-out. The electrical wiring, although probably slightly younger than the building, looks bewildering.

From his office in this "quirky indoor location," Richard Simons says his business is becoming a bit nerdy. His office is stocked with the usual business odds and ends: a water cooler, a fax machine, a computer. It is the high-tech accessories however that would make a nerd proud: the large flat-screen plasma monitor; the small pocket PC with built-in camera, video camera, and phone; the wireless Internet connection.

Richard Simons is a used car salesman. He is not the stereotypical "shiny white shoe wearer or cowboy from Parramatta Road" type of salesman. Richard Simons, the managing director of Oldtimer Centre, uses a pocket PC, tracks visitors on his website with sophisticated tracking software, and sponsors four children through World Vision Australia. Richard Simons wants to use the Internet to change the way you think about car dealers and to change the way you buy a car.

The Australian Bureau of Statistic's February 2004 Internet Activity

Survey reported that the amount of information Australians downloaded from the Internet increased from 2,913MB in September 2002 to 4,665MB in September 2003. During the same period, the amount of Internet access lines increased from 639,000 to 1.3 million.

Simons' data reflect these trends. His site, [www.old.com.au](http://www.old.com.au), receives almost double the traffic it did last year. According to Simons, every 30 or 40 seconds a new person logs onto the site. Using his tracking software, he can see which pages people are looking at, the computer operating system they are using, and from where they are logging on. Presently most people are logging on from Australia, but there are people on the site from New Zealand, the United States, and Japan. And these people are doing more than just browsing; they're buying. Simons says thanks to the Internet he sells cars to people in New Zealand, the United States, Ireland, and all over Australia.

It is these daily virtual visitors that Simons calls nerds. He does not use the term maliciously. For Simons, being a nerd is a good thing; he is one himself: "I bought a boat recently... I did exactly what my buyers do, I went on the Internet, I typed in 'boats for sale in Sydney', I saw one that looked nice, I rang him, I negotiated over the telephone and I bought it," explains Simons. Simons bought his boat without driving it and having only seen pictures of it on the Internet. Many of his customers do the same. "A lot of people don't drive the cars before they buy," he says.

While he is talking, Simons reads and responds to an email from one of his virtual visitors. The person wants to know if the distance travelled listed for a particular car is in miles or kilometres. Simons cannot remember so he relies on his website to tell him. A couple of quick clicks on his computer and he finds the car. Looking at the odometer he can see that the distance travelled is in miles so he types the fact into an email template and “shoots it back” to the customer. The response is personal, quick, and for Simons, fun.

Buying via the Internet is what Simons encourages through his website. He has created a space where you can see the cars, learn about the cars, and learn about owning a second-hand car. He lists everything from financing and insurance to operating costs and looking after your second-hand car. He knows the negative stereotype many people have about car salespeople, saying, “In Australia, car dealers have a very bad name, so people are very sceptical about buying a car.” But through his site he has overcome that scepticism. “Our buyers are thrilled that have seen and they can almost feel and touch the car before they come here and even to the point where they’re negotiating over email,” he adds.

Simons uses his website in other ways to affect people’s attitude towards car dealers. Since 2002 he has sponsored children from Chile, China, Rwanda, and Senegal. He posted an article about his experiences as a World Vision sponsor on his site and encourages people to become sponsors themselves. Once Simons considered

giving away a one-year sponsorship with every car he sold. He decided against the idea when he was not sure if people would renew their sponsorships after the initial year. According to Simons, it is more important that the children have a long-term sponsor rather than many short-term ones.

Already in its second version, [www.old.com.au](http://www.old.com.au) has been running since 1999 and has received many compliments from buyers and browsers alike. Most of the comments posted on the site mention Simons' honesty, effort, and novel approach to selling cars on the Internet. However, resisting the temptation to rest on his laurels, Simons is testing a new site. As he describes it, version three will be "more presentable," have a "nice new search facility," and will be "leaps and bounds" ahead of other sites.

Putting away his pocket PC and turning to look at his flat-screen plasma monitor Simons says, "10 years ago Parramatta Road was the place where you'd go to buy a car, now it's the Internet." He adds, "In the years to come there are a lot more people who are going to become nerds."