

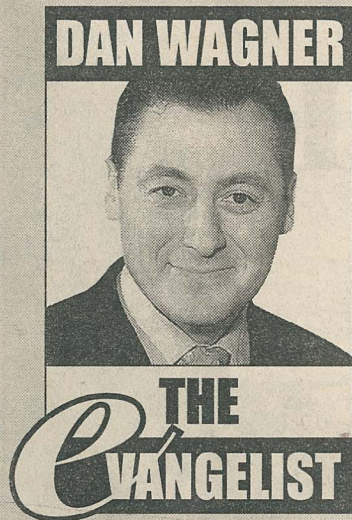
I want to use Bill Gates's wallet

WOULD you trust Bill Gates with your money? The answer to this apparently simple question could well decide the future of online shopping.

One of the lead weights shackled to retail e-commerce at the moment is the reluctance of a great many of us to give up our credit card details to a website for fear that these sacred numbers will end up in the hands of Net-savvy thieves.

Even though the security of the major shopping sites is now tighter than Michael Owen's goal-scoring angles, and despite the fact that you are far more likely to have the waiter in your local restaurant put a little something extra for himself on your card, this fear is still a major factor in why millions of us are still reluctant to join the online shopping revolution.

Another thing keeping the lid on this potential explosion is that online shoppers can't be bothered to register themselves at more than a handful of shops on the Net. Honestly, some of the information you have to enter on some of these sites you'd think you were trying to join MI6 rather than just



buying a couple of pairs of cheap boxer shorts.

But, luckily, it's Bill Gates to the rescue. Microsoft's Passport — the best of a new breed of virtual wallets — promises to solve all these problems.

As a Passport holder, I only have to enter my credit-card and personal details once on Microsoft's site and every time I buy something on any website

around the world that takes Passport, I just enter my Pin number and that's it!

Totally secure. No forms. All done in a few seconds. Fantastic. Put on your darkest pair of Ray-Bans and stand back, for the online shopping explosion is now about to begin.

But hang on — a software company transacting credit-card payments? What about Visa or MasterCard? What about the banks? Surely they are far better placed to do this.

Nope. The credit card companies are natural enemies and find it hard to agree on anything much. The banks? Same deal. Several of them are in the process of building their own virtual wallets — the Egg Wallet will be out soon, and Barclaycard also has plans. The problem with these proprietary e-wallets of course is exactly that: they are proprietary.

Egg Wallet may make it easier to use your Egg card but the bank has only 2 per cent of the UK market. There are another 40 million non-Egg cards out there. And if I were an online merchant, would I really spend a fortune integrating my systems with dozens of

different online wallets? I don't think so. But I would link my systems to Microsoft's Passport.

That's because Bill's company has the critical mass to ensure Passport gets into the hands of more online shoppers than anyone else. About 93 per cent of the world's PCs use Microsoft Windows. A similar proportion of the people who access the Internet do so using Microsoft's Internet Explorer. Each one of the 100 million Microsoft Hotmail e-mail accounts is automatically allocated a Passport number.

It just seems inevitable that more online shoppers will have Microsoft Passports than any other e-wallet, which will force merchants to sign up due to overwhelming customer demand. Microsoft is also bound to make it easy for them as its software just happens to power a large proportion of the world's Web servers.

So Microsoft wins hands down — who needs to become a bank when you can facilitate the world's online transactions?

But will we all live happily ever after at the end of this story? Well, like any good fairytale, this story does have a

dark side. The Evil Queen (no aspersions cast) is Mr Gates himself. The worldwide adoption of Passport will mean that his company will know every detail of every transaction that you make online.

Just think about that for a second. Every single thing you buy will be recorded on a Microsoft database.

Sure, Microsoft already has the ability to know about every piece of software you run on your PC, and they have yet to abuse this information. But will the enormous temptation to use your personal financial transaction data be just too much — even for Uncle Bill?

The growth rate of online shopping may come down to one multi-billion-dollar question — how much do you trust Microsoft?

Prepare for some intensive worldwide spin-doctoring as Uncle Bill and his band of billionaires work hard to convince us we should indeed trust him — with every penny, cent and peseta we spend.

● Dan Wagner is CEO of Bright Station plc
evangelist@brightstation.com