



rich MEDIA makeovers: vendor SUCCESS stories

Not long ago, if you placed a software requisition for Painter (Fractal Design's natural media paint program), the IT organization's likely response would be "Not on our approved software list. Just use Microsoft Paint." Similarly, a request for Sonic Foundry's Sound Forge to edit audio narratives would be denied without comment. Requesting a sound or video editing application quickly pegged you as way out of the mainstream, even though adding a natural media rendition of a photo or normalizing audio narration files for a PowerPoint presentation might give your presentation a winning edge. Times change, but not the way you'd expect. The IT folks still cast a wary eye over software not on "The List," but rich media vendors have been very creative in reinventing their products to develop new revenue streams, often under the rubrics of security or ecommerce. These products have been winning market and IT acceptance. You'd expect creativity from the Rich Media crowd. Occasionally, their makeovers have simply extended existing product lines, but sometimes the new directions have represented quantum leaps. Here are three success stories, starting with the most predictable, showing how rich media vendors have leveraged their expertise in rich media technologies to reinvent themselves.

Remember mid-'90s Webcam sites posting periodic snapshots of a bridge or city scene? INetcam developed easy Webcam real-time video solutions for consumers, but quickly built on that foundation to develop telepresence and security solutions. Admittedly, "telepresence" might be just an extension of remote Webcam viewing, but the breadth and velocity of the product growth deserves credit: from a single consumer product (Webcam snapshots and video serving) to prosumer and business products. On the consumer side, INetcam's iVista home security Webcasting software recently received a significant industry award for its home security remote video surveillance solution. This solution lets you set up a Web camera and microphone, then view and listen to the real-time stream via a Web browser and take remote snapshots of the streaming video. Add motion detection with the ability to send an email alert, FTP a file, or run a program (like a phone dialer to your local police), and you've got a solution that goes way beyond typical home security solutions that cost far more. INetcam has grown this product into robust business solutions: Secure Peer-to-Peer architecture, wireless support, and the ability to incorporate a live video/audio stream into a corporate Web site. Suddenly any business with an inexpensive Webcam can use video to promote itself.

Fractal Design grew its original product line in a similar straight line, starting with its black-and-white "Sketcher," and advancing to both introductory and full-featured colored versions of what may still be the best natural media paint software available. However, its original market—natural media artists—was small, and Adobe's powerhouse PhotoShop one-upped it as one of a suite of complementary graphics offerings. Fractal

changed its name to MetaCreations, and soon afterwards sold the product line to Corel. Maintaining its subject matter expertise, the company morphed into Viewpoint and a variety of Web ecommerce products. These products emphasize 2D and 3D imagery, often enhanced with natural media textures for everything from Web catalog content to medical products. Viewpoint even clinched a deal with AOL to distribute its Viewpoint Media Player in AOL version 7.0. This enables AOL customers to see Viewpoint Experience Technology (VET) content in their Web browsers and within the AOL client itself.

The award for quantum-leap creativity goes to Sonic Foundry, whose original Sound Forge became an early industry favorite for audio editing and recording, effects processing, and media encoding. Sonic increased its core competencies by acquiring MediaSite, a provider of rich media analysis and indexing software that could watch the video and listen to the audio, then catalog it. Sonic applied this technology to its biometric "United Security View" security system. The Sonic product is predicated on the premise that a security system's reliability increases as it is provided more than one type of information about each subject, from text to images and sound, whether a driver's license photo, brief speech clip, iris scan, or passport information. Particularly prescient was Sonic's anticipation of security opportunities before the infamous 9/11. I asked Brad Fentress, Sonic's vice president of product strategy about the key to such quantum-leap thinking. He said that there is openness to risk and creativity within the Sonic Foundry executive team, but Sonic doesn't pursue activities outside its core business. "So, while entering into the security arena was a different market for Sonic Foundry, we were experts in the technologies that we were selling. In this economy, companies need assess carefully their core technologies and always be looking for creative, new ways to generate revenue and build their business from these core technologies." Sonic has also established a Strategy Group to identify new ways for leveraging core Sonic Foundry technologies in new markets.

What lessons can be learned from these rich media vendor makeovers? First, reapply your investments in core rich media competencies, and consider acquiring or partnering with complementary firms. Be as creative in your product management as in product development. Finally, while every company must stay within its core business, stretch the vision of those boundaries. There may be ways to leverage your expertise beyond the obvious, either in a straight line or in an unexpected quantum leap. Maybe rich media can actually make you rich.

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Robert J. Boeri (bboeri@ieee.org) is a knowledge management analyst for a Boston-area biopharmaceutical firm.

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