

## Information Insider

### The CD-ROM Help Desk Hurdle: Who Will Your Customers Call?

by Robert J. Boeri and Martin Hensel

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The plummeting price of CD recorders is putting CD-ROM production onto desktops with almost no-brainer justifications. Drove of small independent producers and, increasingly, corporate users, are getting into the one-off and CD-ROM publishing act. However, information systems (IS) organizations, in-house publishers, and others are quickly finding out that CD-ROM technology--as many once believed--is not "just like a hard drive only bigger and slower." Support and other after-market activities follow CD-ROM publishing as night follows day.

Let's suppose you are a typical new CD-ROM producer. The production software was reasonably easy to use: it let you simply drag and drop Acrobat PDF files and some sound clips onto the recorder. Then you ran some cursory tests, and every base seemed covered when you produced your CD-ROM title. Content was good, performance was fine, and you paid special attention to the layout, screen, and hypertext design of your material. Even though you were sure there were no problems, you tested your product on several differently configured PCs before you had the CD-ROM duplicated and distributed.

Yet now all kinds of bugs are being reported. Some callers can't get the product to run at all.

If misery likes company, you have plenty. Over a year ago, in July 1994, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that a surprising 50 percent of the time, consumers purchasing CD-ROM software were dissatisfied with the product. They frequently experienced hardware difficulties, including the speed of many drives, the complex installation procedures for some multimedia add-on kits, and the general difficulty of dealing with PC hardware and software--all this with an increasingly sophisticated market of consumers, who may be growing more technically adept than the typical business user for whom you developed your title. In fact, one recent study suggests that, on average, one out of fifty users of a CD-ROM title will require help desk support, which typically means about six minutes on the phone per call.

As a developer or publisher deluged with calls, questions, and complaints, you have essentially three options. One is to expand your internal support help desk to become familiar with CD-ROM issues; if you anticipate large call volume, consider increasing trunk capacity as well. If you are planning worldwide distribution for your title, consider non-English-language support, and have someone available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Another strategy is to pay someone else to support your CD-ROM. After you buy their expertise, perhaps you may eventually be able to bring some of the support back in-house, or use a hybrid strategy that combines all this.

#### BACKGROUND ON HELP DESKS

Ten years ago, nobody talked much about help desks except very large software vendors like WordPerfect Corporation. Arguably, WordPerfect's help desks were the best around, beefing up telephone capacity in Orem, Utah to provide prompt support to any customer with a problem.

That support model was too expensive for typical businesses and--

in retrospect--for WordPerfect itself. By the early 1990s, every IS organization was building its own help desk to support its internal client base. The combined forces of downsizing and proliferating applications caused many companies to skimp on training. This promoted even greater reliance on help desks to solve problems that business people couldn't or wouldn't deal with.

As the rush of new desktop applications continued, frequently the help desks themselves began needing help. Even with fancy support software installed, swamped help desks became little more than traffic cops directing clients to in-house experts' voice mail. With increasing emphasis on globalization, many companies couldn't count on uniformly excellent, round-the-clock help desk support.

New CD-ROM applications, especially those supplemented with sound and multimedia graphics, demand good support. Is your help desk up to the task of troubleshooting arcane direct memory access or interrupt request problems? If not, where do you turn? We found several products and fast-growing niche services that may prove useful.

#### TECHNICAL SUPPORT SPECIALISTS

As usual, one size doesn't fit all. However, these variables have proven themselves ones to consider in the support equation: cost, flexibility, service, and your own firm's expertise. The available options run the gamut of costs and size of service; from the full-service high-volume model to alternatives for companies expecting a lower volume of calls.

#### UPGRADE CORPORATION OF AMERICA: A HIGH-END, FULL-SERVICE SOLUTION

In five years, Upgrade Corporation of America (UCA) has grown from an idea to a large supplier of back-office support services for over 70 software companies. Microsoft, Disney (which chose the company to get its support on the fast track for its troubled Lion King title), Borland, Novell, Apple, and IBM head the list. UCA prides itself on operational efficiency. Jordan Levy, president of UCA, boasts of losing a scant one percent of callers, declares that the average inquiry is answered in 18 seconds, and claims that UCA's services reduce their clients' sales, service, and distribution costs by one-third.

A full-service outfit targeting large companies, UCA offers inbound phone sales, outbound telemarketing, order processing, and a variety of other support services, including CD-ROM technical support. Cindy Sweetser, UCA's vice president of North American sales, says her firm "keeps prices low and services high by amortizing costs across large volumes of support calls." One thing this means is that if you expect fewer than 200 calls per day, UCA may not be for you.

#### KNOWLEDGEBROKER: HELP DESK AND DATABASE OPTIONS

If you're a smaller organization interested primarily in technical support and want to preserve your options for both in-house and outside help, KnowledgeBroker Inc. might be worth considering. KnowledgeBroker provides support services to both large corporations and small businesses. Its clients include AST Research, Digital Equipment Corporation, Wyse Corporation, Duke Power, IBM, and AT&T. If you want 24-hour support coverage seven days a week, KnowledgeBroker can provide it. The service company uses its own help desk software and its own knowledge bases, which can include carefully crafted expert systems as well as full-text searchable support information. KnowledgeBroker's integration partners include Inference Corp. for expert systems and Verity Corp. for text retrieval.

If you prefer to buy the knowledge and deliver it via your own help desk, KnowledgeBroker will sell you its ASK.ME HelpBases. KnowledgeBroker claims special expertise for Lotus Notes, Verity's Topic, and many popular word processing, database, spreadsheet, and operating system software.

#### ROMNET: SMALL OPERATION OUTSOURCING

RomNet is another option, especially if you have a small operation but still want to outsource your help desk support for CD-ROM. RomNet,

founded in 1994, provides both CD-ROM help desk and marketing support. Because it is a member of the JNet group, a computer technical support network devoting enormous bandwidth to cable and electronic publishing, RomNet has managed to leapfrog capacity problems that could stop other small service providers.

JNet itself has a full range of services related to creating, managing, and delivering information whether video or document-based. RomNet's alliance with JNet's multimedia expertise is bound to help in CD-ROM support.

For such a new company, RomNet promises a surprising range of services: sales training, market analysis, beta testing, product evaluation, customer training, and end-user technical support via telephone and electronic mail.

RomNet's technical experts are proficient in both PC and Macintosh platforms. Its clients include Papyrus Design Group, developers of popular race car simulation games; Charles River Media, purveyors of a variety of tutorials relating to the Internet; and Conexus, developers of educational CD-ROMs for preschoolers. RomNet supports both consumer and business clients, 7 a.m. to 1 a.m. EST on weekdays and 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday.

Typically, RomNet receives hundreds of calls for consumer titles and dozens of calls for business titles. On the consumer side, RomNet fields 120 to 220 calls per day for Papyrus products, often from the least computer-literate end-user sector, few of whom know or care what video controllers or RAM are. RomNet's customers also include big business clients like a large medical publisher that produces a CD-ROM title providing continuing medical education credits to physicians.

RomNet's support lines can be toll-free or toll; the latter option appeals to some vendors since it puts some initial burden on the customer and prevents the publisher from having to subsidize calls that could be answered by a quick look at the manual. Every RomNet customer, large or small, gets a monthly report explaining what kinds of calls have been received and any comments that could help improve the product's sales. RomNet also provides consulting on the positioning of print products versus CD-ROM products and educating the sales channels about the best ways to sell the products.

RomNet's cost structure, furthermore, is nothing if not flexible: the company offers no standard contracts, which can be a real boon to first-time publishers who may have no idea how much or how little support is required. You and RomNet simply make a good-faith estimate of the number of calls and amount of support required. That estimate is adjusted up or down with product experience.

#### SELF-SERVICE VIA THE WWW

Cisco Systems provides yet another solution, a hybrid CD-ROM and WWW self-support solution dubbed Medusa, which Cisco packages with products to provide voluminous stored information and an online connection to the company's fully searchable Web site for the latest updates. Cisco partnered with Verity to develop WWW text searching, and Verity is now offering this product to others.

A more recent WWW help solution comes from a small company called HyperAct, which has just released a product called "Help Development Kit/Professional Author." This software may prove very useful to companies who have support expertise but need help to deliver it over the WWW. This Windows-based system lets you build a generalized help database and then deploy it on different platforms. These include Borland's Paradox and HTML; with HTML, one of your help media can be Web publishing.

#### THE AUTHORS

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SIDEBAR 1: Companies Mentioned in this Article

Cisco Systems, Inc.  
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San Jose, CA 95134-1706  
800/553-6387  
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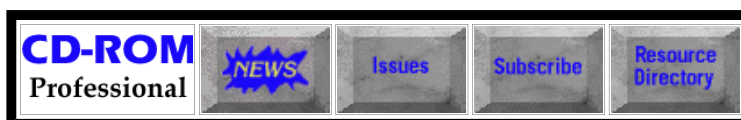
HyperAct Inc.  
P.O. Box 5517  
Coralville, IA 52241  
319/351-8413

KnowledgeBroker, Inc.  
5970 Allen Avenue  
San Jose, CA 95123  
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Upgrade Corporation of America, Inc.  
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Buffalo, NY 14207-2398  
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