

## Information Insider

### CD-ROM/Online Publishing for Small Businesses:Effective Options Emerge

by Robert J. Boeri & Martin Hensel

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You've been elected Executive Director of a 100-member New England regional real estate association that deals in residential sales and vacation rentals. The association is losing business to the national franchises, and you've been asked to "do something imaginative to drum up business for the members, increase membership in the association, and do this on a shoestring budget." The association owns a typical 486 PC with a CD-ROM drive and modem. Windows-based, it uses a word processor and simple page-layout program to produce brochures, listings, and other promotional literature. Some association members use Windows, others work in DOS or on Macintoshes, most but not all have modems, and no standardization of software, of course, has yet been achieved or even attempted.

You read leading CD-ROM trade magazines and are convinced that developing a CD-ROM title might serve the association if targeted at businesses interested in relocation and at the affluent market segment that owns CD-ROMs. Association member brochures and lots of color photos could be published on CD-ROM. But the "content" is all over the place, in various formats, and you've never created a CD-ROM title. You want to keep it simple and you have to keep it cheap: no color scanners, no electronic cameras. Moreover, real estate information--like reservations and pricing--changes continuously. The CD-ROM could deliver loads of content and spark interest in the region, but you'd also like something more immediate to complement the CD-ROM's strengths and weaknesses.

One evening at a friend's house you "cruised the Internet," visiting various usenet travel groups and the World Wide Web. You stumbled upon a discussion of vacation spots in Italy and looked at "<http://www.csd.uu.se/~cesarini/umbria.shtml>". What you saw was a beautiful brochure set up by a young computer student advertising his mother's apartments in Umbria. The student said it took him much longer than he imagined to set this up--about 40 hours. Downloading the apartment pictures took so long you and your friend almost stopped the process. Yet in three weeks, several hundred visitors had looked at the student's work. A quick email to student/ entrepreneur Francesco got the reply that his rental business has really picked up, thanks to his web site: "A person in Sweden is renting out apartments in Italy to people in the States!" he said. "Such would not have been possible a couple years ago."

Without knowing the next step, you are sure these two complementary media are just what you need to stimulate business. But how can you use both media without duplicating the deluge of document-handling hassles that came as a responsibility of your new position? You barely have enough time to do everything once, much less repeat your earlier efforts. The best strategy is to consider your documents as the original sources and derive CD-ROM and Web versions from them.

The Rubik's Cube of possibilities is overwhelming, but a few key elements are common to most successful efforts of small businesses like yours as they have ventured into CD-ROM/online hybrid-based self-promotion. These key twists and turns to a simply solved puzzle

are easily searchable electronic "printouts" of all member materials, an inexpensive CD recorder, tools for producing "Web versions" of selected documents, and a service provider who can make it easy.

#### ADVANTAGES OF ADOBE ACROBAT: FRUITFUL MULTIPLATFORM FILE FORMAT

One extremely serviceable element of the boilerplate hybrid solution is a suite of tools from Adobe Systems, collectively called Acrobat, which use a common file format. The open multiplatform file format is much like PostScript. You can learn about this standard, called the "Portable Document Format (PDF)," in virtually any bookstore or from Adobe itself. In essence, whatever you can print from Windows (a Mac, or Unix), you can also print to a PDF file. That file is compressed, its fonts and pictures rendered faithfully, and the resulting document is viewable across all platforms. However, it is not a fax-like image of printed pages; instead, PDF combines image technology with fonts so that words remain searchable.

PDF and the Standard Generalized Markup Language (SGML) are complementary. Adobe has voiced its intent to support SGML with PDF, providing the best of both worlds. But for now--with the exception of a product called InContext, which combines SGML and PDF--these two standards coexist and complement each other.

Acrobat Reader, which lets you read, search, and print within documents, is freely available. The Acrobat "Pro" package provides not only the readers (for convenience) but also "Exchange" (which includes a PDF print driver and Verity text retrieval client) and "Distiller," which derives PDF files from PostScript.

No matter what their platforms, your real estate association's group members can produce PostScript files and modem them to you. You can distill those files into PDF. You can even leave the association's modem on overnight, and tell "Distiller" to transform incoming PostScript files automatically to PDF as they arrive. Use Exchange to create the necessary hypertext links, and you've got something you could distribute on CD-ROM or over the Internet. Link up with an Adobe publishing partner, and you can buy inexpensive copies of "Exchange LE" which lets anyone perform full text searches on your CD-ROM documents, regardless of the source platform or on which word processor or page layout system the documents were created. The end result could even incorporate QuickTime videos.

#### MERIDIAN'S PERSONAL SCRIBE 750: A SHOESTRING SMALL BUSINESS CD-RECORDING SOLUTION

You also need a CD recorder to publish either one-offs, if the association decides to produce only occasional titles to test the market for this medium, or a master, should you decide to produce hundreds of copies. However, keeping in mind your shoestring budget, you want to shop around.

Meridian Data Systems, a long-time supplier of products to the CD recorder industry, is unique. It offers the least expensive device we've seen: the multi-session Personal Scribe 750. Meridian can sell it cheaply by bundling together a SCSI and recorder that requires no magnetic staging drive. Meridian achieves the smooth uninterrupted flow of data to the recorder by caching information in extended memory. Should user demand for your CD-ROM make it worth your while to keep copies of your PDF files, it will be simple to add another SCSI drive to the system. All this comes from a respected CD recorder vendor offering a single point of contact for help when you need it, which makes for an attractive choice. And the price as of the writing of this column was approximately \$2000 less than the competition, which does use staging disks.

#### HTML--THE SGML CONNECTION

In addition to putting these documents on CD-ROM as PDF files, you may want to put the smaller ones on the Web too. To do that you must create versions tagged with the Hypertext Markup Language--currently a simple form of SGML commonly used in Internet-based search engines. Some companies, such as the New York Times, do both: they've created the necessary HTML documents to establish a presence on the

Web. Additionally, they make PDF documents, like the New York TimesFAX, available at the click of a button on the Web page. In about three minutes with a 14.4 modem you can download an 8-page edition, complete with crossword puzzle.

You are unlikely to be able to use your entire legacy of documents in their current format on the Web. There are software assistants to help convert many kinds of documents to HTML, but Web publishing works best in small chunks. However, for documents written in Word or WordPerfect which are suitable to deploy on the Web, you may find free add-ons to help with conversion.

Other inexpensive yet powerful tools that enable this conversion include SoftQuad's HotMetal 2.0 for Windows, which retails for about \$100 provides easy conversion from a great many word processor formats (including Digital's ancient DX/WPS+) and also supplies starter templates to help you build your own home page. More than just a converter, this product includes a parser to guarantee your end result is valid HTML. So, you can use this tool to convert existing documents, modify them, or create Web materials from scratch.

#### SELECTING A SERVICE PROVIDER: NETSCAPE AND INTERNETMCI

Web service providers abound, so the budget-conscious will again do well to shop around. Should your business grow to a regional or national presence, there are some good reasons to consider larger providers such as MCI. First, MCI has bundled Netscape with its own InternetMCI product (and Netscape is working with Adobe who is working with Verity which provides CD-ROM and Web searching, and so forth). Additionally, MCI is allocating significant resources to setting up its MarketplaceMCI. MCI is aggressively marketing MarketplaceMCI to both content providers and customers, offering not only virtual store fronts in a virtual mall, but also virtual yellow page listings currently under development. And with the resources of MCI, your customers can certainly get help if they need it; the service's Help Desk is top notch.

#### A CHOICE FOR CHEAP COLOR IMAGING: SEATTLE FILMWORKS

Getting color images in formats you need for your developing titles can be as simple as sending out a roll of film if you choose the right color imaging service provider. Seattle FilmWorks has developed a proprietary imaging scheme that lets it put up to 24 photo images onto a 3 1/2" diskette. These images aren't reduced to 256 colors either; they are true 24-bit color in 640 x 480 pixels.

The first time you use their service you receive free software to view those images and convert them into many popular formats, such as GIF, JPEG (required for Web publishing), and many other formats, including PhotoCD! Seattle FilmWorks is the solution for easily getting rental or other photos into your publishing system, with no scanner required.

#### A SMALL BUSINESS CD-ROM SUCCESS STORY: THE CASE OF CYBERGRAFX

And what, if anything, has resulted when small businesses have followed this approach in their limited-run CD-ROM development? Steve Marks of Cybergrafx in Raleigh, North Carolina has been developing CD-ROMs using Adobe's Acrobat products for over two years. He won't even consider any competing system: "Adobe knows PostScript and fonts."

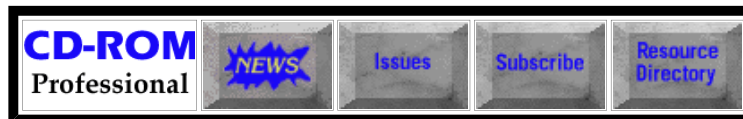
Marks has also produced a Web site to distribute "teaser" condensed versions of latest issues, to entice visitors to buy the CD-ROM or print products. This site will be updated whenever new articles are ready. Marks plans to move up from dual publishing to a true hybrid CD-ROM/online system (click and log onto the Web site directly) after getting the initial Web site into production.

And finally, how does Web-based aspiring transatlantic real estate mogul Francesco feel about HTML and the benefits of setting up his Web site? "I believe HTML and SGML will have a very short life," he says. "They will soon be replaced by tools such as Pagemaker." Whether PDF, SGML, or both become the future language of the internet, as a methodical small business owner developing CD-ROMs or CD-ROM/online hybrids, you'll be ready.

So, pick the right combination of tools, adhere to the rule of keeping your information in the original sources from which you derive other versions, and you can become a dual publisher on CD-ROM and the Web. In the short term, you'll meet your goal even as you remain susceptible to the vagaries of word processor formats and upcoming changes in HTML. In the long term, this strategy may force you to repeat your efforts as technologies or formats change. The real solution could be SGML publishing, which is already the best solution if you can afford the investment in an SGML document base.

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