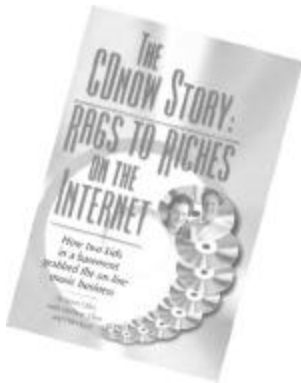


## Becoming a WeBillionaire

### A Review of *The CDnow Story: Rags to Riches on the Internet*

*The CDnow Story: Rags to Riches on the Internet*, Jason Olim with Matthew Olim and Peter Kent. Top Floor Publishing, Copyright 1998. \$19.95 USA, softbound, 236 pages including index. ISBN 0-9661032-6-2. Category: Internet/Business. Reader Level: Beginner to Intermediate.



Although Internet fortunes are almost becoming routine news, this gem of a book provides a fascinating inside view of how two twenty-something "twins in a basement" created a legendary Internet success story. Starting in 1994, a \$20,000 loan from their parents, and their parents' basement, the Olim twins developed a premier web site selling music CDs that beat the competition and made themselves paper billionaires. When you learn that some of the competition --like MCI-- spent millions of dollars on a similar project, and then lost out to the twins, you realize that the rules have changed. Maybe there's hope for the rest of us.

If *The CDNow Story* were nothing more than a tale of luck, hard work, and lots of peanut-butter midnight snacks it would be interesting enough.

Many of us have been there and done that, without the billions. However, this book goes beyond a well-written story to talk about the art and business of web sites, including the importance of human factors, accessibility and interface design to their success.

Although it shouldn't have surprised me (the Olim's are, after all, billionaires), I was surprised with the business acuity and amount of free business advice they gave. For example, they focused like a laser on their site's purpose: "There are many reasons to have a web site -- to promote a product being sold in the real world, to provide customer service, to add value to a product by providing additional information online. In our case, the purpose of the Web site was to sell products directly to consumers... We are trying to build a better music store, [our competitors are] just trying to sell music. We're focusing on function, they're focusing on design."

Yet do not infer from this that they are uninterested in design. Indeed, they simply believe that form follows function. They then explain how painstakingly they develop and enhance their web site, including focus-group testing and interactions between Quality Assurance, Product Marketing, and others.

Is it too late to develop anything new? Have all the good ideas (and billionaires) been developed? The twins remind us in this book: The web, for all intents and purposes, is less than five years old. Opportunities are limited only by our imagination and willingness to think in radical new ways. They claim that there will always be a place for bricks-and-mortar businesses, but they also identify opportunities in new services.

"Middlemen will start providing incredible new services -- information services-- that will revolutionize their markets."

As Information Design and Development professionals, information is our bread and butter, and understanding how to use the web effectively is a requirement. If we become billionaires in the process, so much the better.

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©Bob Boeri. Bob works by day as a Document Technologies Consultant for Factory Mutual Insurance Company; after hours, he is a columnist and frequent contributor to EMedia Professional and other publications. To get in touch, send email to him at [bboeri@world.std.com](mailto:bboeri@world.std.com).