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Abstract:
Companies such as SilverPlatter Information Inc (SP) and Ovid Technologies Inc should think of themselves as being in the information industry rather than the CD-ROM industry. New products include SP's Electronic Reference Library client/server software and the Ovid Java Client web software.

Full Text:
Passenger Railroads in the United States are said to be in such bad shape because at a crucial moment the managers mistakenly believed they were in the railroad business when they were actually in the transportation business. The same sorry fate may await companies that distribute information on CD-ROM if they mistakenly believe they are in the CD-ROM business.

Two prominent companies that got their start with CD-ROM are showing they are in the information business, not just the CD-ROM business. Silver-Platter Information Inc. (SP) and Ovid Technologies, Inc. found initial success with CD-ROM but now see their futures encompass a variety of distribution options.

SilverPlatter and Ovid start up

SP was founded in 1983 to develop technology, software, and products for the emerging optical digital disc. At the 1985 American Library Association conference the first prototypes of SP's CD-ROM databases for the library market were unveiled. SP was one of the first companies to apply the online vendor model to the then-new medium of compact discs by entering into agreements with bibliographic database producers such as the American Psychological Association and Sociological Abstracts.

Early prototypes spanned a range of topics, including bibliographic files on education (ERIC), social sciences (PAIS, LISA, PsycLIT), and medicine (EMBASE). Today SP has agreements with approximately 100 database producers to offer more than 250 bibliographic or full-text databases.

Ovid was founded in 1985 (as CD-Plus), solely to apply the MEDLINE database to CD-ROM. The Ovid software used MEDLINE's Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) and tailored search and display to this one specific, highly structured bibliographic database. By the early 1990s the company branched out to other National Library of Medicine databases and the CINAHL (Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health) database.

Today, Ovid offers more than 60 databases on CD-ROM and a total of 80 databases on CD-ROM, online, or the web. The company focuses on scientific, technical, and medical topics, but Ovid offers social science and business titles as well.

Networking CD-ROMs

Each of these companies made its name and fortune with a single technology, but the limitations of stand-alone CD-ROM became clear early on. Many experts believed networking CD-ROMs impossible at worst, impractical at best.

In 1988 SP managed to introduce the first CD networking system. Multi-Platter allowed multiple workstations to use a single CD-ROM database, making CD-ROM a practical alternative for online searching even at large university or public libraries. After this first breakthrough, the networking of CD-ROMs became commonplace. The model of "one workstation-one disc" was broken.

Online offers more

Still, the inherent limits of CD-ROM make seek and access times too slow for libraries with large numbers of simultaneous users. (Neither Ovid nor SilverPlatter would specify an exact figure for "large," but Ovid says, "We never really push CD-ROM networks. A

magnetic network makes sense for any institution with any reasonable [number] of users. We are seeing an increasing number of consortia customers, and CD-ROM is not the thing for multiple sites or multiple customers.") The obvious solution: locally loading databases onto the library's or consortium's mainframe, or switching to commercial online vendors.

Throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s, libraries turned to other companies when they wanted formats other than CD-ROM. Soon, traditional online companies such as DIALOG and WestLaw began to trespass into CD-ROM territory. It didn't take long for both SP and Ovid to recognize the wisdom of going beyond CD-ROM to offer additional information solutions.

In 1993 SP introduced its Electronic Reference Library (ERL) client/server software. With ERL, libraries can load and search databases locally, or they can access remote online databases loaded by SilverPlatter. According to an SP spokesperson, "designed to support multiple servers in large, high-access environments, ERL technology provides local and remote access to information across a range of networking environments." Since ERL is Z39.50 compatible, library systems can use it to offer SP databases with their own OPAC interface. Currently, there are 400 ERL sites.

Ovid entered the online world by purchasing the BRS online system in 1994. With BRS, Ovid got lease agreements from many social science databases and a loyal online customer base, as well as a functioning online system (see "Good-Bye BRS, Hello CDP Online," Online Databases, LJ, March 1, 1995, p. 26,28). For several years, Ovid continued to support a BRS emulator interface for experienced online searchers; now the BRS emulator software is mostly replaced by Ovid Online software, which offers the same Windows graphical user interface as its popular CD-ROM software.

More than 60 databases are available on Ovid Online, many (but not all) of which are also available on CD-ROM. Unlike with its CD-ROM system, Ovid is focusing on adding more full-text databases to its many bibliographic offerings on the online system.

Moving to the web

Not surprisingly, both SP and Ovid believe their biggest growth will come from web versions of their systems. Whether because of the sheer numbers of web users or some superiority in web interface design, the web browser interface supported by HTML-encoded documents has become the online system of choice in many libraries.

Last year SP launched WebSPIRS, the web version of SPIRS (SilverPlatter Information Retrieval System). WebSPIRS provides access to a library's ERL network or to the new SilverPlatter Internet Subscription Service. WebSPIRS version 3.0 allows customizable search screens and is password-or IP address-protected. All of the SP databases are available on WebSPIRS, and, according to SP, the cost is equivalent to CD-ROM.

New versions of WebSPIRS are tackling many of the inherent search and display limitations that arise when using the web and web browsers for information retrieval applications. Ease of use in the web environment doesn't always translate to full functionality without some major programming effort. WebSPIRS now features a toolbar with customized search features; a "mark records" capability that allows records to be selected and marked for later printing or downloading; record sorting capabilities (by year, author, source, or other fields); and improved record display options, thesaurus features, and online helps.

On to Java

Even before SP, Ovid introduced "Ovid Online -- Web Access" and a Web Gateway Intranet product. At the same time, Ovid began a strategy to add many full-text articles, particularly in science, technology, and medicine. All of these full texts are being fully SGML-encoded by Ovid to allow maximum searchability, linking, and flexibility in the Internet environment. Libraries can choose to subscribe to one of six full-text collections (articles from which are linked to the MEDLINE, CINAHL, and PsycINFO bibliographic databases), or they can pick individual journal titles for full-text access. In addition to subscription pricing, Ovid's SGML articles can be bought on an individual "pay-as-you-go" basis.

This year a new generation of Ovid's web products introduced the first extensive use of the Java programming language in commercial online systems. Ovid says its Ovid Java Client offers many advantages over other web products "because it is a true client application."

Ilyssa Greene, Ovid public relations manager, offers three reasons for Java's superiority: "Speed is first and foremost. Java brings up the text immediately and opens up a separate pipe to the server for the graphics." Secondly, because Java applets don't reside on your hard drive, each user "automatically gets the latest version" of the software and the system "takes away the burden of overhead." In addition, users can easily customize their applications.

A Java client offers increased functionality as well, so that features from Ovid Windows software can be replicated in the web environment. Features such as zooming in and out, customized printing, and a static toolbar for all Ovid databases are in the Java version. Searchers can view their search history in a drop-down Java menu and go back to combine sets. According to Greene, "The Java client brings the functionality of Windows to the web." The result is that the use of CD-ROM and online Windows versions of Ovid has decreased "as web is becoming the standard."

A majority of Ovid customers are now switching to web access or to intranets. About 30 percent of Ovid's total customers purchase CD-ROM, but many of these also use online or web versions. About 40 percent of customers outside the United States purchase CD-ROM.

Today, approximately 20 percent of Sp's customers use WebSPIRS, but that number is expected to increase. Currently all of SP's

customers still purchase databases on CD-ROM.

CD-ROM -- and DVD

Clearly CD-ROM is not dead yet. According to Bela Hatvany, founder of SilverPlatter, "[CD-ROM] enabled the new form of electronic publishing and was an ideal media in that it allowed low replication cost and distribution. But as the media of the Internet evolves and is perfected, CD-ROM will inevitably get pushed out. This will take a decade or two to occur worldwide.... CD-ROM will continue to be increasingly important worldwide for a few more years."

Ovid's Greene believes, "CD-ROM will be around for awhile. Small customers who need one or two key databases and want access to them locally will want CD-ROM, and we will continue to support it, but we will not be adding databases at as fast a rate on CD as online."

The new high-density optical DVD disc may engender a revitalization of optical read-only discs. This year, SP became the first database vendor to introduce DVD products with "the Union Catalogue of Belgian Research Libraries," shown at Online Information '96 in London in December. SP's second DVD title should cause more of a stir. MEDLINE Advanced will be available this year, as will additional DVD titles from SP. For now, DVD will not replace CD-ROM for SP customers; it provides just another distribution option that places SilverPlatter on the cutting edge. However, until libraries purchase DVD drives, there will be no library market for this newest optical option.

Defining the company

SilverPlatter and Ovid are not just in the CD-ROM business, but they don't echo my statement that they're in the "information business." Ovid's Greene says the company sees itself as "an aggregator of content." With Ovid's Full-Text Initiative and Java Client, Ovid is "converting texts to SGML, loading them, and handling all administration of full text in one place."

Hatvany says SP is not in the information business: "We are actually in the knowledge business. We distinguish knowledge from information.... When information is made to be authoritative [when it is approved by some group of people who have been given an imprimatur by society], it becomes knowledge. The imprimatur can never be automated by CD-ROM or the Internet. It will always have a human face."

Aggregators, information companies, knowledge providers -- whichever terms you use -- Ovid and SilverPlatter are clearly not dependent on any one medium or technology. In an age when no one can be sure what the newest information technology will be from year to year, this is indeed a smart strategy.

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