

INFORMATION TERRITORIES

DOCUMENT DELIVERY CUP 1990: Ei 1 AWAY 0

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Manhattan keeps a precarious balance between chaos and confusion. When the Big Apple gets a worm -the demolition of the ignominious West Side Highway, for example -the fragility of complex systems turns one's thoughts to technology.

There I was . . . gridlocked in a Yellow Cab on a hot and cloudless May morning. Earlier in the week Engineering Information (Ei) had been the subject of favourable comment at the National Online Meeting, tenth anniversary edition. I roasted in my own juices inside an American-made taxi with black plastic simulated cowhide, wondering would (A) the driver's neon creche melt, (B) I arrive suitable for eating at Ei's building, (C) Ei's CD-ROM/image/document delivery work?

My faith in products 'made in the USA' was slipping. The windows and air conditioning didn't work. Other image-oriented CD-ROMs I had seen shared some features of this Ford Crown Victoria taxi, namely complex, overblown and hideously expensive. The gossip at the trade show said that Ei had integrated on a CD-ROM the odd bits and pieces for querying a database and getting the full text of a document at a price Jack Benny would have loved. Ei, the Americano cognoscenti chattered, blended CD-ROM technology, Compendex Plus citations, online updating, offline review of results, automatic ordering of the full text via modem, image or facsimile transmission of the articles back directly to the customer's personal computer, and the kitchen sink. "Best of all", a high information industry official observed, "it actually works".

The day before my taxi ride through the streets of hell, I asked Ms Berger what the truth was. She said, "Our new product allows customers who want to order copies of the articles cited in Compendex Plus to choose a delivery option appropriate to their timetable. Our goal was to give people who wanted to automate ordering of photocopies from us a way to take advantage of the most advanced technology at the lowest practical price. We're using Microsoft Windows' technology and reliable parts to give people who buy documents what they want most: flexibility, speed and a competitive price. And the customers don't have to have all those image discs at their office or library."

I had to see to believe because the future's bright at Ei. The organization has outfitted itself with an effective new president (John Regazzi, formerly with H.W. Wilson), an intelligent new vice president (Eric Johnson, formerly with John Wiley & Sons electronic publishing group), and a strong supporting cast featuring Mary Berger (past president of **ASIS**). Maybe Ei's technology would work better than this six-metre banana-hued gas guzzler with sealed windows and a decorative air conditioner.

I arrived, and yes, Ei's on to something. I put the Ei CD-ROM with software and one calendar year's citations from Compendex Plus into the PC's optical drive. The familiar Microsoft Windows' interface let me launch the various software modules. Mouse clicks activate functions. I used the keyboard only to enter my search strategies.

Unlike CD-ROM publishers who feel compelled to reinvent both fire and the wheel, Ei licenses Dialog Information Services' **comms** software to allow the CD-ROM user to connect online with the full Compendex Plus database. Thus, a searcher may supplement his CD-ROM query with more current online citations. The software downloads the citations and allows the user to use a mouse click to indicate for which citations the full text article is needed. I was able to review my photocopy

order before transmitting it to Ei via modem. Once I was satisfied with my document order, I clicked a button to dial up the Ei computer. The software automatically uploaded my order with my instructions for method of delivery.

Had Ei stopped at this point, the CD-ROM, its interface and the log-on updating capability are well-done and extraordinary because of the intuitiveness of the software implementation. But Ei has gone a step further. Using proprietary technology, it has captured images of the source documents on CD-ROMs. When the order is received at Ei, staffers retrieve the image and can transmit the image directly back to the customer's PC.

The image may be displayed on the customer's screen or printed on his laser. Ei also offers delivery by fax, messenger or post. No costly image/CD-ROM disc farm gobbles money or scarce real estate on the customer's property. Other image products allow users to print documents locally which raises questions about copyright and disc control.

Several things impressed me about the Ei approach. The product uses off-the-shelf components and an interface which is easy-to-understand. Dialog's software is a proven performer and pulls customers to online, not driving them away from it as so many CD-ROM products unwittingly do. Ei credits TMS, an Oklahoma company, for some of the software wizardry. Microsoft Windows is taking root as a graphical interface for the PC-compatible world because it runs on garden-variety machines.

Ei hopes to have the commercial version of the product on the market in the next six months. Other database producers are likely to build upon Ei's platform. Ei's rate structure had not been set when I played with this system. Technical wizards are completing the final software debugging, but I encountered no problems. My guess is that each CD-ROM will cost about US\$600.

Unlike some other CD-ROM publishers, Ei will keep the discs in line with a calendar year,

so each disc corresponds to an electronic annual compendium of data. Taking advantage of the document delivery service which is an integrated part of the CD-ROM will cost slightly more than a more traditional delivery mechanism. Based on guarded comments at Ei, a single six-page article would cost the customer about **US\$20** delivered by modem image transfer or facsimile transmission. The same order delivered by the US post office would tally **US\$15**.

Of course, document delivery services will watch Ei closely . . . enviously too I imagine. Ei doesn't foresee the need to have the discs containing facsimile images of the journal pages at the client location. Consequently, its approach is the opposite of that taken by other technology Balboas who have visions of acres of whirring and glittering discs and drives at hundreds, maybe millions of libraries worldwide. Ei, true to its engineering heritage, has approached the problem of offline searching, online updating, and painless access to the full text document with pragmatism, thoughtfulness, and market sensitivity.

Riding to the airport in another of NYC's ubiquitous **FoMoCo's** Crown Victoria taxis, I firmed up my thought that the document delivery business is undergoing a structural change. Companies can purchase **WORMs** and scanners and make their own image databases. They will be able to download the abstract-and-index information for the publications to which they need access. Bingo! In-house document delivery. Maybe someone at one of the US telephone companies is thinking this too?

When this happens, publishers, the real information providers, are going to be forced to take a more critical and hopefully informed look at their electronic rights policies. With rapidly advancing image technology, how will publishers be compensated for these electronic facsimiles? The big firms — traditionally high-volume consumers of photocopies — will want the delivery method

which offers the best combination of ease-of-use, speed, and price. Who, I wonder, will get the job of facsimile policeman?

My taxi driver shouted in Portuguese, Valley-speak and Urdu that I had arrived at the airport and owed him \$20; I wondered if hard-copy delivery systems would take the Ei path or follow a more American approach and continue to build grotesque and extravagant devices.

As I handed over the money and pulled myself out of the black plastic seat, microfilm crossed my mind: microfilm, unloved but economical. Then I remembered the Australian Dr Kingsley Allen, who had squished the Bible on one **105mm x 148mm** plastic sheet by inscribing computer data on plastic cards. "Watch that mate", I reminded myself.

List of firms cited in this column:

Dialog Information Services, 3460 Hillview Avenue, Palo Alto, CA 94304, USA.

Engineering Information, 345 East 47th Street, New York, NY 10017, USA.

TMS Inc, 110 West Third Street, PO Box 1358, Stillwater, OK 74076, USA.