new MEDIA

HyperActive: The Story of The HyperMedia Group

BY DANIEL TODD

Jim Edlin, Tay Vaughan and Eric Alderman: diverse personalities powering a growing business on the cutting edge.

SEQUESTERED IN THE PRESS ROOM AT THE 1987 FALL COMDEX SHOW, THREE computer journalists and hackers—Tay Vaughan, Eric Alderman and Jim Edlin—casually began talking about building a business around the then-nascent HyperCard technology. Nearly four years and more than 50 multimedia projects later, the three partners provide full-time work for a crew of 15 programmers, animators, database aces and other new media craftsmen, under the aegis of The HyperMedia Group.

This year promises to be a breakthrough one for the Emeryville, Calif.-based company. It is working on 30 projects, which it claims will generate revenues in the seven-figure range, and

We get our kicks from staying on the leading edge, riding the learning curve.

this summer, IBM made the company an official business partner.

So how did this gang of former journalists turn their intimate knowledge of HyperCard into a bustling business? The multifarious personalities involved deserve most of the credit. The team offers a rare blend of business and creative skills. When the trio met both Eldin and Alderman had already founded companies and developed software products, and Vaughan had gone through numerous career shifts. Among other things, he had been a senior scientist at Applied Dynamics and a chief master carpenter in the refit of an America's Cup yacht. Edlin brings an experienced marketing and management focus, as well as a

keen eye for production visuals. Alderman is masterful at coaxing power out of object-oriented code and at roping serpentine projects back onto a straight track. And Vaughan thrives in the eye of the storm as a do-it-all new media ranger. The others call him the "Red Adair of multimedia."

At the outset, the group wisely decided to focus on services, rather than products, based on HyperCard and later PC-based equivalents, such as HyperPad. Its first target market was presentations for computer vendors. After doing a few in-house projects for Apple, the partners decided to take a chance and buy some space at the March 1988 Hypermedia show (now Multimedia Expo) in San Francisco. Novell Inc. had come to the show specifically looking for someone who could build a catchy HyperCard stack for the rollout of its first Mac product, NetWare for the Macintosh. Kevin

Millecam, then Novell's network-products marketing manager, said he picked the group to do the project, because "it was obvious they knew their stuff like no one else."

Six weeks later, The HyperMedia Group delivered a stack for the Macworld show in Boston that featured several firsts, including font animation and other "candyware" (items that tempt people to spend more time with a stack), such as a glossary of networking terms and draggable screen objects. "It was a revolutionary stack for its time," said Millecam. "Other people were trying to do animation (in HyperCard) and other things that The HyperMedia Group delivered for us." The stack caused a stir at the show, and Apple's Jean-Louis Gassée used it in his keynote speech.

Branching Out.

With a highly visible success in the area, The HyperMedia Group probably could have made a living just by creating marketing pieces for computer companies. Indeed, it continues to take on many such projects, including Tandy's rollout of MPCs last month (see picture), but the company decided that it also wanted to pursue the corporate and institutional presentation market and to design new information products for entrepreneurial firms. "We get our kicks from staying on the leading edge, riding the learning curve.

HyperClips, a package of PC-based animation and sound clips for business, represents The HyperMedia Group's move towards marketing its own application and content titles.
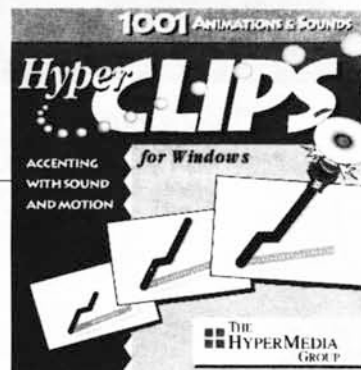
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"By being generalists, we may lose some business in the short term, but we remain excited," Vaughan said. The company said its business is now evenly split between the three types of services.

The group has completed numerous projects for innovative start-ups. Its recent successes include building Display Net, an interactive CD-ROM catalog for display retailers (see Studio) and Speak92, a SuperCard-based system co-designed by Open-Mind International, which teaches non-native English speakers American English by placing them in interactive business situations. It is targeted at the emerging European Community market.

The HyperMedia Group's first entrepreneural venture was in 1988, leading to a product called Attorney's BriefCase. Bruce Wolfe, a HyperCard enthusiast, had come across an attorney who possessed a remarkable set of index cards detailing preferred procedures for specific legal situations. Wolfe contacted The HyperMedia Group, which converted the index cards into an intuitive piece of context-sensitive legal-research software for both the Mac and the PC.

"I came to HyperMedia with a wish list and they implemented everything we wanted and actually expanded on my vision," Wolfe said. He also said the group's ability to put a pretty face on an enormous and heavily cross-referenced database was critical to the success of the project. "There is a vast amount (of information) under the hood, but it is extremely clean in the sense that it is very user-friendly," he said. In the process, HyperMedia helped create a thriving business for Wolfe and his associates, who say they now have hundreds of users and are busy building more modules covering different aspects of the law.

Speak92! is a SuperCard-based product that teaches American English for business by putting students in simulated video scenarios.

One of The HyperMedia Group's specialties continues to be product roll-outs. The Group used a video blue-screen effect to animate the figure in this piece for last month's introduction of the Tandy Multimedia PCs.

Working with another consultant, Zev Rattat, the team built the Mac and DOS products in parallel, using HyperCard for the Mac version and HyperPad for the DOS version. That may seem like a logistical nightmare, but the group prides itself on its cross-platform prowess. "We have wanted to do PC projects for a long time but the software just wasn't there," Alderman said.

Last year the group decided to cash in directly on that expertise by releasing ConvertIt, software that allows developers to convert HyperCard stacks into Asymetrix ToolBook books. ConvertIt is distributed by Heizer Software Inc. of Pleasant Hill, Calif., a leading stack purveyor. Producing titles and tools will form a growing part of The HyperMedia Group's strategy. It just released the PC version of HyperClips, a set of animations and sounds for business presentations and has more modules and a Mac version and on the way.

Staying on the Edge.

So what advice does a graybeard new media production house have to offer start-ups? The partners say it is wise to offer your services in as many fields as you can effectively handle. The HyperMedia Group's diversified experience in building marketing systems, boardroom presentations, information products, training and performance support systems, and technology adaptation pieces and titles, gives it a knowledge base that it can apply to virtually any new project. Second, the partners say, it is critical to develop close relationships with software vendors. Ties developed over the years are invaluable because they yield access to beta and even early alpha software, well before the competition gets it.

Finally, the group believes it is crucial to continue sniffing out the latest techniques. Edlin said that the group has been preparing for the day when video becomes an affordable, easy-to-manipulate data type for several years already; although it doesn't believe it will be widely using video in applications for another two years. Vaughan said that while it is important to rely on your proven experiences, "You have got to keep one foot over that leading edge, so you can offer services that others haven't figured out." ∎
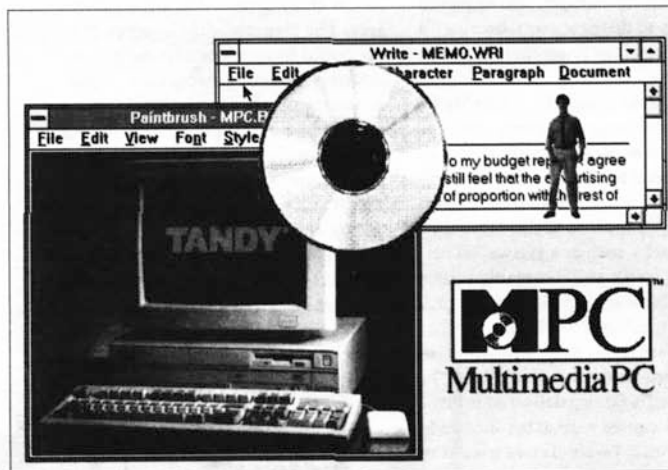
Display Net

A GOOD MANNEQUIN IS HARD TO FIND.

At least that's the premise that led

Electronic Catalog Corp. (ECAT) of Cincinnati to commission an electronic ordering system for retail-display industry buyers. As a nationwide distributor, the company was finding it increasingly difficult and expensive to present its products to its long-distance clients. Although ECAT previously had used paper catalogs and brochures, it found that these not only disappeared onto shelves, but also were expensive to update in the rapidly changing fashion industry.

To catch buyers' attention and dollars, Jay Fisher, president of ECAT, asked The HyperMedia Group of Emeryville, Calif., to create an electronic-presentation and -ordering system.

Display Net, the finished catalog, is delivered on a combination of the Macintosh and CD-ROM technology. Now being used by buyers at retailers Sears Roebuck & Co., Nordstrom Inc. and Mervyn's, the program is a completely automated tallying-and-ordering system. The buyers make their selections on the computer screen and then send their order forms back to ECAT via modem. ECAT, using a fax modem, then forwards the purchase orders to the individual vendors.

For The HyperMedia Group the first phase of the project was evaluating delivery platforms. ECAT had wanted to use a DOS-based platform because of the operating system's large installed base, but the requisite software wasn't there yet. SuperCard for the Mac seemed to fit the bill, and HyperMedia began working with SuperCard while it was still in beta.

Display Net pushed SuperCard to its limits, and not just by the 10,000 product items and 5,000 color pictures involved. ECAT wanted each image to keep its own set of colors, even while different product pictures were compared side by side on-screen. HyperMedia ended up writing external commands, that solved the problems of displaying multiple color palettes simultaneously on-screen and the flashing of screen colors as the palettes changed. If it hadn't used externals to solve the color flashing problem, flipping through images would have taken five to six seconds for each image.

While SuperCard, from San Diego-based Silicon Beach Software Inc., a subsidiary of Aldus
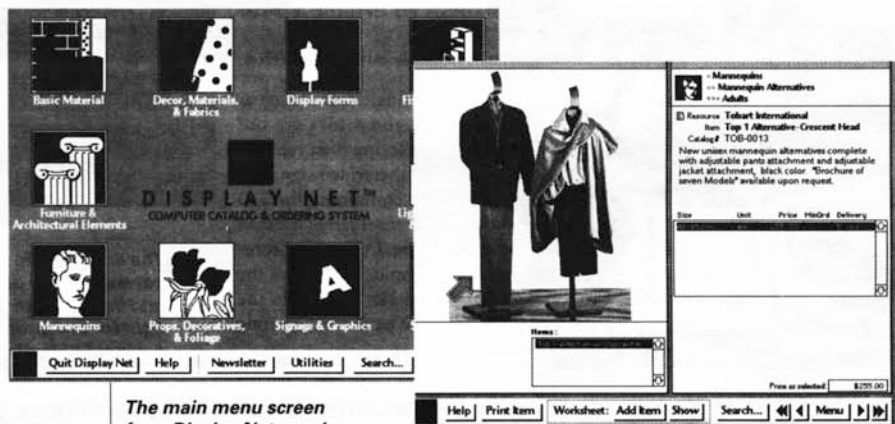
The main menu screen from Display Net, an electronic catalog from Electronic Catalog Corp., or ECAT, of Cincinnati.

Store buyers make their selections from more than 10,000 product entries. ECAT then forwards the purchase orders to the vendors.

Corp., turned out to be the best development system for Display Net, ECAT found that most big customers didn't own Macintoshes; therefore the company leases complete systems that include either a Mac IIsi or LC, a modem, a hard disk drive and a CD-ROM drive for between $150 and $200 a month. The CD-ROM disc itself is updated quarterly.

In producing Display Net, ECAT also created COS, a catalog-authoring engine that can be used to update or generate any kind of product catalog. Once information and images are stored on a hard disk, ECAT's COS converts them into a catalog-ready master to be taken to a CD-ROM duplication house. The conversion process takes from one to eight hours.

Fisher said that publishing a catalog electronically is ecologically sound and cost-effective. The average merchandising catalog of 64-80 pages, including mailing fees, costs more than $2. Display Net's tab is about $1.28 per disc, including mailing and production expenses. CD-ROMs also can be updated more easily and deliver a stronger impact. ∎

Custom SuperCard XCMDs let simultaneously displayed images retain their unique color palettes.