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**The Webzine Lives**  
by Pam Weintraub

In the Spring of 1996 I was offered the dream job of a lifetime -- the chance to convert the national science magazine, OMNI, into an electronic publication that would live and breathe only on the Web. Working in uncharted territory alongside a host of new titles -- including Salon, Feed, Slate and Swoon, I found that cyberspace opened vistas impossible to even contemplate in print.

If the old medium had been static, delivering a finished product to users, the Web enabled us to serve up a kaleidoscopic feast that changed from one second to the next. At OMNI, that meant real-time, interactive coverage of the 1996 presidential election with writer Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters as hosts, as well as nightly chats with world-class thinkers and scientists.

While the old medium was linear, ideal for stories with beginnings, middles and ends, the new medium was associative: at Feed, for example, the result was a piece on the editorial power of hyperlinked text; entitled "Miracle Device," the story was, of course, delivered bit by bit, through a series of hyperlinked web pages that potentially made the point. And if conventional magazines were vehicles by which editors and writers could communicate with readers, Webzines were something else: virtual communities where everyone could interact online. At Swoon, a

Webzine on dating, mating and relating, that meant a publication that doubled as a meeting place through active forums and a stylish personals section.

But despite the promise of the Web, some of the most innovative Internet titles were killed this spring. Stars that shone briefly in the cybersky -- gems like Word, a look at culture and society; Charged, an action sports title, and Total New York, covering the Big Apple -- just seemed more trouble than they were worth to parent companies who had to underwrite the cost. And in April, General Media pulled the plug on OMNI as well; though critically applauded, OMNI Internet would have required years of nurturing on the business front before it could stand alone.

As a Webzine editor devoted to the medium, I have been forced to ask the question, What does it take to succeed? One answer is a company with deep pockets and enough foresight to view the Web as an investment -- one that may not pay off for years.

Among the major publishers, CondeNast may be a front-runner in terms of sheer strategic smarts. CondeNet, CondeNast's Web arm, publishes Swoon, as well as Epicurious: For People Who Eat, Epicurious Travel and a health 'zine, Phys. According to Sarah Chubb, director of CondeNet, these sites are anchored by content from the company's print publications, like Glamour and GQ. Nonetheless, they deliver mostly original content, based to a large degree on the intrinsic interactivity of the Net.

Phys, for instance, allows visitors to calculate their ideal weights, rate their snacks and track their fitness progress with special software right at the site. At Swoon, says managing editor Melissa Weiner, visitors can receive horoscopes by email or ask columnist Jane Err for romantic advice. "The Web can do what print cannot," Chubb explains, "and our Web brands have a reason to exist unto themselves. CondeNast has a commitment to the Web as an incredibly exciting and important medium. We want to get our foot in the door now."

CondeNet opens its sites to all comers and banks on advertising revenue to pay the bills. But other 'zines, like Microsoft's Slate, have opted to charge for access. Slate's move is seen by many experts as premature-what Web users will pay for remains unclear-though it's courageous as a statement that quality content has a price in cyberspace, just as it does in print.

Companies without the sheer economic clout of Microsoft or CondeNast, meanwhile, will need a different set of strategies if they want their 'zines to stick around. Tom Watson, editor of @New York, Silicon Alley's weekly source of news and information -- and one of the few Net publications currently in the black -- says a key to success is operating lean. "Keep yourself purposely small, don't get into debt, and try to build a following. Expand your operation based on revenue," suggests Watson, whose publication numbers its full-time staff at two.

It is just such leverage that underlies the success of one of the Web's most outstanding sites, Salon. Originally founded in 1995 by four reporters dissatisfied with jobs at the San Francisco Examiner, this e-zine is currently the premiere source for investigative journalism on the Clinton crisis in any medium. Editor David Talbot, who started Salon after growing weary of the "lite news" he had to serve up at his day job, says the relatively low cost of Web publishing enabled him to return to the "golden age of newspapering, when there were columnists like Jimmy Breslin, and when newspapers were known to champion causes and undertake crusades." Salon, explains Talbot, was just more nimble than print counterparts. "We didn't have institutional baggage," he says, "and we could allow our writers to be fearless and colorful, to stake out positions, without stopping to worry about who we might offend."

Salon's courage has paid off: the e-zine now has a staff of 60 and, with about 550,000 users a month, will be profitable this year, thanks in large part to advertising revenue, but also to syndication fees.

And late last month, shortly after Word and Charged were killed, comes news that these two titles have risen from the grave. The unlikely

rescue team is the Houston-based Zapata Corp., a food-processing business now launching a major strategic initiative on the Web.

Maybe we're starry-eyed, but for the record, the former editors of OMNI believe in content on the Web, too. Though it was impossible for our parent company, General Media, to keep the mega-project of OMNI Internet alive without losing money, we can, we have come to understand, keep a more modest e-zine afloat ourselves. Our new science fiction, fantasy and horror webzine, Event Horizon, slated for launch this August, will cost us little to produce beyond our time. At the moment, we expect no paycheck, nor any corporate benefits. Instead, we'll be getting something better: 100 percent ownership of our dream. We are in it for the distance and as true believers, we can't help feeling that staking a claim and establishing equity in the Wild Web will pay in the end.

*Pam Weintraub was editor-in-chief of OMNI Internet until the plug was pulled this April. She is currently publisher of the soon-to-be-launched science fiction, fantasy and horror Webzine, Event Horizon, and a freelance writer and Website developer in New York City.*

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