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BusinessIT

David Welcher, writing for BusinessIT from New York, dials into a family effort that's grown into an international service

WHAT has dozens of lines, and can grow to thousands of them? If you answered a Jackson Pollock painting, it's a valid response, but this article is not about oil paintings. It's an inside look at the maturing of a on-line "cottage industry" bulletin board system into a successful international enterprise.

Occupying a 22,000 square-foot loft in lower Manhattan, New York's Invention Factory Bulletin Board System (BBS) is the nine-year-old brainchild of system operator (Sysop) Michael Sussell and marketing director Kathy Sussell. The loft is also their home, shared with three children, a cat and a dog.

As the enterprise has grown from one line and one computer to its present octopus-like incarnation, the distinction between office and residence has blurred. As Kathy explains, "We used to work out of our home. Now we live in our office."

The Invention Factory is not just a whimsical name. Ten years ago, Michael was busy dreaming up inventions, like an illuminated electronic yo-yo. "At that point in my life, I fancied myself as 'The Little Old Toy Maker'," he explained. To facilitate his research, he purchased an IBM XT with a 10 Mbyte hard disk and a modem. Hours spent on commercial services like Dialog convinced him there had to be a better way.

"The charges for some services could run to US\$ 300 per hour, and the manuals were impossible," Michael recalled. Kathy then suggested he try some of the new BBS services. "They have plenty of software," she told him. "Besides, we don't have any more money!"

The 10 Mbyte disk filled up rapidly, and they started copying the files to floppies. "Pretty soon, we had thousands of floppies. Then we got bigger and bigger hard disks. The phone bills were mounting, too. Finally, Kathy suggested we start a Bulletin Board system. That way, people would send us software."

And they did. Today, the Invention Factory features over 250,000 files occupying more than 10 gigabytes (10,000 Mbytes) of disk space. Its most innovative feature started a few years ago. For a modest subscription fee, callers could get through virtually any time with no waiting.

"We decided to make the system pay for itself. So, Ezaccess was born. We were selling something unique -no busy signals, for only US\$ 150 per year, which allows three hours of access per day. We add lines as necessary to make sure you can always get through."

EMC/VMWARE v. PersonalWeb

There are over 3,000 subscribers, with nearly 500 from other countries. Many have opted for the premium Ezaccess service. Currently there are 46 lines, each supporting a US Robotics 16,800 baud modem. Fifty more are coming on line shortly. For those with the patience to get past a busy signal, there is public access for only US\$ 25 per year. Six hundred patient users regularly share this single line. The entire operation is currently receiving in excess of half a million calls per year.

Invention Factory's biggest accomplishment was the recent link with the Internet. "We offer the full news feed from the Internet. It took us about a year of programming to marry it to our BBS interface, but this has greatly increased our subscriber base," Michael happily explained.

As their demand for additional lines grew exponentially, they exhausted the capacity of their building. That's when New York Telephone came to the rescue. In a no-cost programme aimed at growing small businesses, they installed an optical link in the basement of Michael's building.

"It amazes me just how far this cottage industry has come," he marvelled. "We now have, in our home, the capacity to support 100,000 incoming telephone lines!"

Armed with this much potential capacity, they searched for ways to capitalise on it. The international call-back service was born. Account relations and billing are handled by US Sprint. A 486 computer running a custom OS/2 application can support 32 lines per PC. Callers are given a personal line on Michael's premises.

"They call in and hang up on the first ring. Our system calls them back at a predetermined number. After they enter a password, they have a US dial tone. Even though they pay for both 'Leg One' -the call back to them, and also for 'Leg Two', the call from here to their destination, plus a flat rate access fee of US\$ 250 per month, it still provides a huge saving to the volume caller. In some cases, we are 40-60 per cent less expensive."

They do not anticipate competition from the major international telephone service providers, like AT&T. These companies all have contracts with the various countries to provide telephone service both in and out. For them to offer a service like this might jeopardise those agreements.

Does he expect competition from other US entrepreneurs? "There are already other companies doing this," Michael admitted. "But we have a special advantage. Subscribers can access our bulletin board with a local call once they are connected. US software is very expensive overseas. Accordingly, there is a tremendous demand for our public domain and shareware files," he explained, referring to software which may be experimentally used on a trial basis before payment is expected.

Other services are also being considered. One is the possible distribution of commercial software. "With piracy a continuing problem, the electronic distribution of commercial programs with an unlock key provided after payment is made becomes a real potential solution," Michael explained.

What might the future hold? The Sussells are not predicting the future, but expect they'll find equally innovative services to offer as new technologies emerge. "We consider ourselves unemployable," he humorously suggested. "What I mean is, we could never work for someone else. So, whatever comes along, you can be sure we'll be a part of it."

The Invention Factory may be reached in New York City via modem at 212-274-8110, with eight data bits, no parity and one stop bit (8-N-1). Supported speeds are from 2,400 to 16,800

**GRAPHIC:** Bulletin board: Invention Factory's on-line 'cottage industry' system has matured into a successful international enterprise

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