This story is from the ebook “The Education of a CD-ROM Publisher: An Insider’s History of Electronic Publishing” by Chris Andrews.

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Chapter 8

A CD-ROM Bake-off in

the Middle of Manhattan

The First CD-ROM “One-Off” Systems

1989

I t was mid-January, and a rival company, Optical

Media International (OMI), made an announcement

that stunned the management of Meridian Data. They

announced they were the first company to build a record-

able CD-ROM device, and were having a press conference

to demonstrate the technology. They had tested it in Japan

several months before, and were going to show a working

model for the first time in the United States.

The idea was simple. In traditional CD-ROM publish-

ing, the eventual CD-ROM is tested, simulated, and

prototyped on a large computer hard disk. When every-

thing on the hard disk is exactly the way the publisher

wants it, then the information is copied onto a nine-track

tape (or shipped on the hard disk) to the CD-ROM factory.

With a recordable CD, also known as a writable CD or

a “one-off,” publishers could make their own CDs. To

people who published CD-ROMs, this was the most impor-

tant advancement in CD-ROM publishing imaginable. It

meant the creative and development process could incorpo-

rate making a CD, instead of shipping everything to a

factory just to make one for testing.

We scrambled when we realized we had been upstaged

by a competitor with an announcement that signaled a

significant technological advance in CD-ROM. There were

varying opinions of the potential sales of these devices. But

everyone agreed that it was a great story and “making your

own CD” was sure to attract a lot of press attention. We

decided we needed to organize our own press conference,

and where else would you want to show how to make your

own CD, but in the middle of New York City.

We examined the announcement from OMI with a fine-

toothed comb, looking for areas they might have missed.

There was bad blood anyway between OMI and Meridian,

and the threat of lawsuits between the two companies was

commonplace. OMI would characterize Meridian as a

bunch of thugs, and Meridian liked to imply that OMI was

always on the verge of going out of business. They sounded

like two kids fighting in a sandbox. “I’m going to be the

leader!” “No, I’m going to be the leader!” This attitude

was pervasive at trade shows, when each company would

send spies to the other’s booth to see what they were

saying. The problem was, everyone knew who worked for

the two companies, so rarely did the scouting produce

anything more than good drama.

The president of OMI was Allen Adkins. Yes, the same

Allen Adkins who five years earlier had given me his flow

chart in a schoolroom in Mountain View. Adkins sold his

first premastering system in 1986 to Sonopress, part of the

German publishing giant Bertelsmann. The same year,

Meridian sold its first system to Triad, a large automotive

parts distributor. Since then, OMI and Meridian had be-

come the only two companies in the CD-ROM

premastering business in the U.S., except for Reference

Technology who sold a system made by a European com-

pany. Coincidentally, both Meridian and OMI had begun

business near Santa Cruz, California.

In the Macintosh and music arenas, OMI was consid-

ered more creative and knowledgeable. In the technical

documentation and database area, which was the bulk of

the CD-ROM business, Meridian was ahead. In the presi-

dential image department, Fred Meyer liked to view himself

as an astute visionary, leading from a distance but not

touching. Adkins’ image was as I had seen him years earlier,

an “on-the-leading-edge” inventor who would break new

ground, then not quite be able to take advantage of his

pioneering effort. The recordable CD was no exception.

Moving with precision and speed, Lou Hoffman orga-

nized a press conference in New York City. Lou handled

the PR for Meridian Data as well as HP, which put him in

an awkward position when I left HP. We hoped that the

Optical Media announcement would not make much noise.

As Lou said, “If a tree falls in the forest, and no one is

around to hear, did it make a sound?” Luckily, OMI’s press

conference on January 31 didn’t make much noise, and we

had the benefit of hearing several informal reports about

their demonstration. We thought we might have a hit by

playing up “the first time a CD is going to be made in the

middle of New York City.” Who could resist?

We found a comrade in Rick Doherty, a respected writer

who happened to have the world’s largest private collection

of information on the Challenger shuttle disaster. He had

known the late Dr. Richard Feynman, the respected Nobel

prize winner who testified at the Challenger hearings, and

had collected information from the hearings in his memory.

He had all the transcripts from the hearings, in text and on

tape. What better demonstration for the press, we decided,

than to type in “o-ring” and find the testimony where Dr.

Feynman made his famous demonstration in front of Con-

gress. The audience could hear his speech right off the disc.

Plus, we would make this disc right on the spot. We were

certain this would be the first time any of the audience

would have seen a CD being made.

It was exciting to see who accepted the invitation to the

press conference—Rolling Stone, Time, Business Week,

New York Times. We boarded the plane for New York, with

most of our fears now centered on how to get 600 pounds

of equipment to the hotel and guarantee that it worked.

Working against us were the three weeks it took for our

technical people to build “CD Professional.” Working for

us was the fact that it was essentially an integration of the

Yamaha CD Recorder with the Meridian CD Master, which

was an advanced version of the CD Publisher for mastering

facilities, so it required little original development.

Arriving at the hotel, we found the union men

uncrating two big boxes. Scott Fast, the Meridian engineer,

quickly went to work setting up the system. We decided to

put the CD Professional on the opposite side of the room

from where we would play the finished disc, emphasizing

that we were really making a disc and not faking it. Fred

Meyer and I would give the speeches. I would concentrate

on the nuts and bolts, and make the disc during my talk.

I’d start by describing the CD Professional, then make the

Challenger disc—which would be finished ten minutes and

ten megabytes later. Fortunately, we decided to scrap our

oven mitt idea, and the whole idea of “baking the disc.”

Humor would have been pushing it.

After the demonstration, Fred would give his high-level

talk, and answer questions. The question we dreaded was,

“What is difference between this announcement and the

OMI announcement?” We practiced our speeches well into

the night, with the help of Bob Callaway, a colleague of

mine from NewsBank and a speech coach. Bob worked on

many things that were not new to me, since I had spent a

lot of time with him. On the other hand, Fred was enthusi-

astic about working on his speech, but he didn’t pick up

the physical, visual style Callaway preached. Fred, always

the professor, was attached to his charts, graphs, and calm,

deliberate hands. Callaway went for image and results and

personality. Maybe we should’ve just left Fred alone. Fred’s

hands took on an appearance of a confused kitten, not sure

where to go or what to do.

The next day, March 21, 1989, we made a CD-ROM

for the first time in New York in front of 50 press people. I

placed a blank $100 Fuji disc into the CD Professional, and

started the process. I talked for nine minutes, then the

drawer popped out and the disc was done. I carried it over

to the computer with the CD-ROM drive, Scott put the

disc in and typed “Russian roulette.” From the 17,000

pages appeared a quotation by Dr. Feynman about NASA’s

statistical overconfidence, comparing it to Russian roulette.

Next, the room was filled with the sound of Dr. Feynman

speaking the same words—from the same disc. I could see

the eyes of the reporters looking around the computer

wondering if our demonstration was for real. Fred then

gave his speech. The question of OMI and Meridian did

come up, and Fred handled it elegantly. The whole thing

came off without a hitch.

Whether we convinced these people that we were show-

ing something revolutionary remained a question. There

was no doubt though, that they thought it was pretty neat

to see a CD-ROM being made, especially one that had

17,000 pages of information and audio from the Chal-

lenger hearings. And all in ten minutes. In the following

weeks, the CD Professional was everywhere, including in

Business Week where it was portrayed somewhat tongue-in-

cheek as a “way for little guys to make CDs on desktops…a

do-it-yourself desktop discmaker,” costing only $98,000.

At 600 pounds, that’s only $166 a pound—a bargain.