

Information World

review

DECEMBER 1997 INFORMATION WORLD REVIEW

NEWS 15

Plucky little aRMadillo challenges online giants

Tim Owen profiles a niche company information provider

Despite 20 years of developments in online company information, the network of narrow streets surrounding Companies House in London is still thronged with tiny company search firms providing customised services to their own clients. Founded in

1974, the Raymond Morris Group offers not only on-demand company search and documentation services, but also credit reports, company registrations, trademark services and a shop selling business books and legal stationery. Now it is venturing onto the Web.

Raymond Morris (RM) may not yet have a high profile in the wider information industry, but its Managing Director Manny Cohen sees the launch of its aRMadillo Web site as a way to change that. "Through the Internet, RM now has access to a global market and that same market has instant access to us," he told *IWR*. "Also, as it is a Web-based product, other sites can be linked to aRMadillo through their own site to complement their products, as Butterworths has done. aRMadillo through the Web can only help to raise the RM Group profile."

small firms must find it increasingly difficult to compete in areas such as company reports or credit referencing with Infocheck Equifax, ICC, Dun & Bradstreet or Experian as they move to Web-based services? Not so, said Mr Cohen. "The aRMadillo Web site is not just an information database. The other developing parts are company and trademark registration – both UK & international – and business books. In addition, the information part of RM's site has been designed to link in with its offline and international reporting services.

Though our site has some crossover with the large players, we feel we are providing a different service from most of them."

Personal service is the niche players' other key weapon, Mr Cohen believes. "We do expect a large amount of business to come in online, but for specific advice you can never beat personal contact," he said. "I was talking to another online provider some time ago and was told that half their helpline calls were clients ringing in for a chat."

<http://www.rmonline.com>



Manny Cohen: "Triumph over uncertainty"

RM launched the product on the quiet at the Barbican Solicitors Exhibition last June. "It was more to test reaction than anything," Mr Cohen said. "We were pleasantly surprised – aRMadillo was well received and since then it has taken on a life of its own." Further enhancements are planned over the coming months, with a lot more free data in the coming months, he added. "Particularly important developments are planned for the company information section which we now know to be well ahead in the marketplace as an Internet product."

aRMadillo represents the culmination of some far sighted planning. "We made the decision to go to a Web-based carrier over two years ago – this was before it was a general medium and in advance of all the marketing hype," Mr Cohen pointed out. "These things don't happen overnight, but we felt it was the correct direction to go in." It was also, according to Mr Cohen, a triumph over the uncertainty that has been prevalent in the industry over the past 20 years or so. "In the 1970s, when company information moved over to microfiche, all the pessimists among us forecast doom and gloom," he explained. "But what it did in fact was to increase the availability and speed of information as well as competition and users, so enlarging the market. The same happened in the late 1980s and early 1990s with direct access online databases and CD-ROM, and another leap forward was presaged by the arrival of the Internet."

"Rather than worry about it," he continued, "I actually feel that we are all really lucky to be in an industry that is taking its third jump forward in as many decades. In fact, all the forecasts show that the information industry is set to double in the UK alone by the year 2000 – and that is rapid expansion."

Production costs on the Web are the same for a niche operator as for a global player, so surely

in brief

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