

by Charles Rubin

If you've never seen an issue of Boardwatch magazine, picking a copy may be the best thing you could possibly do for your understanding of the online world. Unlike other magazines that cover the Net, the Web, or online services, Boardwatch doesn't have blinders on: it covers the whole spectrum of online presences rather than just the Net or the Web, and it does a very good job of it, too.

Started in March, 1987, Boardwatch is still edited by its founder, "Editor Rotundus" Jack Rickard. For my money, Jack consistently has the best understanding of what's really happening online, and he shares it with readers month after month. The magazine began by focusing on bulletin board systems, and it still devotes much of its space to the business of running a bulletin board, but it also has monthly columns covering all the major online services, the Web, Internet law, and government regulation of communications businesses.

One of Jack's early insights which has proven to be true is that bulletin board sysops (system operators) will eventually become Worldwide Web presence providers or Internet Service Providers for their subscribers. This phenomenon is now sweeping through the 60,000+ BBSs in the United States as these systems are migrating to Web sites, offering full Net access to subscribers, or making themselves available to other Netizens via Telnet. As the line blurs between the BBS business and the ISP or Web provider business, Boardwatch's focus has broadened accordingly.

For those interested in the future of electronic marketing, the magazine's October issue features a Webwatch column by Jack Rickard that's not to be missed. In it, Jack proposes that the Web is "destined to die in its current form." He goes on to say, "...after clicking through the thousands of sites available for a few weeks, almost everyone tires of the game and starts looking for a home. Since most of what the web can do is present information via eye-candy screens, they rarely find one."

Jack suggests that the successes of the future will be sites that encourage community-building through interaction. For marketing guerrillas, it's another way to forge human bonds and use relationship marketing. Most of us use the Net to form or nurture relationships with other people through e-mail or discussion groups. If a Web site doesn't encourage this kind of relationship-building, it becomes little more than an electronic billboard on the Info Highway. Although there are exceptions to this in sites that offer hard-to-find information (directory sites, for example), most of us should be thinking about how we can attract a community of users to our site and keep them there through interactive communication.

If you look at popular Web sites like HOTWIRED, you'll find them to be places that encourage user participation in electronic discussions. The October '95 issue of Boardwatch illustrates this with a feature article about The Well, which illustrates the point by having made a very successful transition from bulletin board system to Web site.

Boardwatch won't win any awards for art direction, but each issue is packed with information from Jack Rickard and other industry notables like John Dvorak, Bob Rankin, and Jim Warren. If you can't find an issue of Boardwatch locally, phone the subscription office at 1-800-933-6038 (www.boardwatch.com). Subscriptions are \$36 a year and are worth every dime.