

Inter Office Memo

CORPORATE DIVISION
Corporate Research

To: Alan Kay

From: R. Stein

Subject: encyclopedia project

Date: 10/29/82

A recent meeting (the first) of the ad hoc/informal encyclopedia project committee came up with some interesting ideas regarding the short-term online encyclopedia. There was unanimous opinion that the online encyclopedia should not be put into a development phase at this time. A complex of reasons boils down to the following:

- A) We don't even have a working model of what we want so how can we expect to have something on the market in 3 years. (And a close variant) If we don't have a model, then it is really still a research question and should not be put into development at this time.
- B) An online encyclopedia that is "Nexis with a better interface and some PLP graphics" may not be good enough - especially in three years. The major concern here seems to be the limitations imposed by existing CRT displays.

While I don't accept "B" as given, I agree that we need to do some experimental work, free of the pressures and constraints of product development before we can decide whether or when we have a model that is ready for development.

Specifically it was suggested that we could bring in the seeds of a development team now and let them work on the job of "putting the existing database (EB etc.) online," working particularly on some of the problems and developing the tools related to manipulating a database of this size and complexity. Second, a small number of people could work on designing an interface, while others study communications questions etc. Then nine months or a year down the road we can decide whether to go for a short-term product or not.

In addition to allowing us to proceed with a lot more confidence and knowledge, this strategy has the compelling advantage of not requiring the hard sell (to HCD, EB, and to Ray) of the online encyclopedia at this time - before we have a model, before we address the communications/distribution questions and before we've done our business plan type homework.

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Assuming we decide to go ahead with the online encyclopedia, this strategy at worst will cost us some time. In exchange for the lost time, however, I expect we could end up with a much stronger product.

I think it's quite likely that EB will go for this idea - research and experimentation for a year and then a decision - especially if we agree to make them privy to most of the research results. They are not that keen on rushing an online encyclopedia to market anyway, given their fears that such a product would compete with the print version.