

Is there Life after CompuServe?

Proprietary entertainment forum leaves home and gets its feet wet on the Big Web.

As eDrive faces a world without hourly connect charges, it's hoping a community will follow it to the Web. It's a classic cliffhanger plot: the bright, happy opening; signs of trouble building ever so slowly; the climactic explosion inching closer. Will the heroes narrowly escape tragedy, or will they plunge dramatically, leaving viewers gasping for breath?

The scenario is now in production at eDrive (short for Entertainment Drive), one of the most popular "supersites" on CompuServe. As CompuServe's rates and customer base have dropped, companies

that rely on the connect-time business model must look to other revenue sources or perish.

eDrive's leading men are Michael Bolanos, 32, a boyish-looking former talent manager, and Jeffrey King, 28, a model and actor. The pair started eDrive on CompuServe in early 1994 from their Astoria, N.Y. apartment. It was self-supporting from the first day, earning a percentage of the connect time users paid while inside the forum.

People visited eDrive forums to chat, read the latest industry gossip, and to download pictures of celebrities and clips of upcoming films. eDrive's first major success was a clip of the Disney blockbuster *The Lion King*, posted before the film's release in July 1994. Download requests slowed



Bolanos (l) and King (r) are steering eDrive toward a new business model.

traffic on CompuServe's Columbus, Ohio-based computer system for 48 hours.

Revenues were high enough for the company to move into a 4,000-square-foot Manhattan loft in December 1994. The office has since expanded to 12,000 feet.

The pair's success drew attention from the press and potential investors. All were turned down—until CompuServe, in mid-1995, wanted to break with a longtime policy of remaining separate from content providers and make a substantial investment.

"We are their greenhouse program," Bolanos laughs. They used the infusion from CompuServe's investment to build their Web site, which went up last October.

To date, the site is bringing in advertising dollars via banners (supported by a fully

automated ad server) but is not yet "revenue-neutral." The company is developing an online store that sells entertainment-oriented merchandise (movie posters, for example) and entertainment software the company develops, including the latest version of eDrive's QuickTime movie viewer.

On the Web, eDrive faces competition from Mr. Showbiz, the E! Network, and others it didn't face on CompuServe. King is counting on a sense of community, a hallmark of their success on CompuServe. "We don't want to lose the power that the interactivity of the Web offers," he

says. The site plans a major foray into chat when it concludes a testing of the available chat software. At press time, the finalists were iChat and the avatar-based E-Pub.

In February they began running Solaris 2.5 on a dedicated Sun Sparc 20 dual-processor server with 128MB of RAM and an 8GB fully mirrored drive array, hosted by Digex, a Tier-1 provider in Washington, D.C.

Bolanos is ready for the open competition on the Web. "We have really tried to focus on establishing the brand as substantively as possible. We learned what consumers want thanks to direct feedback from a million people. The CompuServe investment will give us time to let a new business model begin to work." (<http://www.edrive.com>)

—Hilary Marsh