

Demand still high for Boost New's old media

Niche market survives for CD-Roms and DVD-Roms

Stephen Ballantyne

The surprising thing about Boost New Media isn't that the seven-person Wellington-based design shop is doing business building websites – plenty of people do that – it's that, despite its name, it's doing a fair amount of business in what has become a slightly old medium – CD-Roms and DVD-Roms.

After all, wasn't it just last week that Apple announced a super-thin laptop computer with no built-in optical drive? A decade ago, when Apple introduced a computer without a floppy disk drive it turned out to be the beginning of the end for floppies. Are CD-Roms and DVD-Roms similarly doomed?

Boost New Media director and co-founder Nathan Donaldson doesn't think so. "About half our work is websites and web applications, and the other half is educational multimedia for the local and some overseas markets. In the past 10 years I've been involved in more than 20 educational CD-Roms.

"When we started Boost in 2000 we thought CD-Roms were over and we'd never do them again but it's turned out not to be the case at all."

Indeed, the CD-Rom as a distinct medium with its own conventions does have a slightly dusty, last-century flavour; in the 1990s Microsoft and others published what were essentially animated books on CD-Roms, some of which still clutter my shelves: CD-Roms on movies, wine, atlases, even the Encyclopedia Britannica (and you can still buy the Oxford English Dictionary on CD-Rom, for \$875).

As a publishing genre CD-Roms were largely swept away by the internet, surviving only in niche markets – such as education.



ACROSS THE BOARD: Hired first as a designer, Nathan Donaldson had to learn programming and project management, skills that have come in handy

"Schools often still don't have the structure to use internet resources as well as they should; we're often delivering a gigabyte of data on our CD-Roms. It wasn't so long ago that you'd find schools sharing a single 56kb dial-up connection; things have got better in the cities but in some country areas it's still not happening.

"Also, teachers are not always technically adept and CD-Rom-based information can be easier for them to handle. They receive a package from the Ministry of Education containing a classroom resource and they can be confident that [unlike the internet] it doesn't contain any inappropriate content, that it follows the curriculum and so on. They're Crown copyright, so they can be duplicated and distributed freely – we've had cases where immigrant children have taken language instruction CD-Roms home so their parents can improve their English skills as well."

In the 1990s specialised CD-Rom production software was commonplace but these days Boost builds everything in Adobe Flash – "We use Flash as a rapid application development tool rather than as an animation tool with all the data stored as XML, JPEG and MP3 files for maximum reusability," Mr Donaldson said.

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make sure it can be easily transported to the web so that if the ministry decides it wants to put material online we re-purpose it really quickly."

But apart from Boost's nostalgically appealing educational work, the company has found itself producing more and more net-based work, particularly web sites that are



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more or less front ends to content management systems.

"We have two designers, two programmers, an integrator and a project manager," says Mr Donaldson. The mixture of skill sets probably accounts for Boost's sites to be generally cleanly designed and technically sophisticated at the back end, although Mr

Donaldson admits that he began with a background in design rather than programming.

"At my first job, working for TVNZ, I found they'd hired all designers and no programmers, so I had to adapt to that role; there was no project management either, so I had to learn how to do that too.

"Luckily we've got people to handle the really sophisticated parts but I still maintain an interest in web technologies generally and I'm constantly trying out new technologies to see whether they're appropriate to us.

"For example, we built The Couch [thecouch.org.nz, built for the Families Commission to allow that organisation rapidly construct, conduct and collate online polls] with Ruby on Rails. It's been great – Ruby on Rails fits in well with an agile development methodology, which in the long term makes it easier to support and maintain.

"We're committed to open source software, with the Rails stack on top of MySQL and Apache. And we use PCs running multiple operating systems under VMware for compatibility checking.

"Our goal is always to keep our clients happy and make them look really good. So far the word of mouth that generates has been enough to bring in as much work as we need."