

MEET THE NETZINES

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The telephone rings and Jaime Levy ignores it. It sounds off three more times, before transferring to voicemail. "Annoying, isn't it?" asks 28-year-old Levy, her voice dripping distaste. Wearing a T-shirt and torn jeans, her blond hair cut in a girlish bob, smart and sassy Levy has become something of a poster girl for the future of mass-marketed, online technology. The puckish multimedia designer turns back to her computer, which, as usual, is jacked into the World Wide Web. "If somebody calls me on the phone, they better have a damned good reason. I communicate with my designers by e-mail all day. I can't keep track of everything on the phone, but with e-mail I can see where all of it is."

Technology has been good to Jaime Levy. As creative director of *Word*, the Internet's premiere online "zine," she is creating new uses for computers and, in the process, introducing innovative media to advertisers. Along with other online, sponsor-supported publications—including *Urban Desires*, a culture and service journal aimed at city dwellers; *Mr. Showbiz*, which updates entertainment industry news on a daily basis; and *Addicted to Noise*, a zine aimed at rock 'n' roll fans—*Word* (heavy on cheeky, first person essays about the ironies of twentysomething life) represents the next wave in the transferral of information and opinions. Unlike other sites on the Net—such as Time, Inc.'s *Pathfinder* or *Wired's HotWired*—these publications have no correlations in the physical world. Existing only in cyberspace, they contain articles that are never laid out on boards, never sold on newsstands. They provide readers and viewers with an interactive experience that includes sight and sound and links to sponsors' Web sites. For advertisers, the Webzine represents a brave new world that's as revolutionary at the moment as television was in its earliest day.

The downside, however, also mirrors the infancy of television. To begin with, despite the hype, only a minuscule percentage of the public is currently online (though that population will doubtless expand exponentially in coming years). Second, those who are online often find that technology has not yet caught up with some of the best ideas. Slow modems (actually anything less than 28.8 bps) and graphically bogged sites combine to make cruising the net more like crawling. Addressing that, cyber designers face the double whammy of keeping

pages graphically interesting yet minimizing the number of elements that need to be transported over antiquated phone lines. "For a print magazine you can do anything that someone can imagine on a page, with any number of typefaces and as many columns as you want," says *Addicted to Noise* publisher Michael Goldberg, sounding a bit bummed. Then Goldberg, who had been a writer/editor at *Rolling Stone* before founding ATN, brightens and adds, "But we can animate our headlines, and that's something that print publications will never be able to do."

Additionally, magazines are cheaper to produce on the Web than they are on paper, and they never go out of print. All of the above mentioned publications maintain easily accessible libraries of previously published issues and articles. *Word* does away with the notion of issues altogether, simply adding new stories to its site and relegating old ones to an archive that's been dubbed "Dead Word."

The paperless format also allows for incredibly complete coverage of subjects, as is evidenced by *Addicted To Noise's* book-length report on Lollapalooza and its definitive article about the alternative band Primus. "We had 10 Quicktime videos, 60 photographs, and the most in depth interview with [band member] Les Claypool that had ever been done," points out Goldberg. "For Primus fans there was an overwhelming amount of stuff."

On the graphic upside, netzines have done nothing short of creating a new publishing paradigm. Viewed on screen, their pages contain objects that shimmy and speak—or, in the case of *Addicted To Noise*, play snippets of music by story subjects—and break through the barriers of static design. In creating a graphic piece on skateboarders, for example, Levy assigned a photographer to shoot the story's subjects, then she opened the article by having each skater's eye animated and abstracted in little boxes on the page. Click your mouse on the eye of your choice and it morphs into a portrait of the corresponding skater. But, Levy assures, she has something even more interesting to show: an early version of a collaboration between painter Michael Bevilacqua, poet John S. Hall, and herself. On *Word's* contents page it will be listed as "Talking Paintings."

She clicks her mouse on a primitive rendering of a man with a cigar jammed into his mouth, and, presto, we hear Hall recit-



(ABOVE) A SCREEN-GRAB FROM THE HOME PAGE OF WORD, WHICH IS REGULARLY UPDATED AS BACK-ISSUE ARTICLES ARE RELEGATED TO "DEAD WORD."

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ing a poem that's keyed to the image. As Hall reads online, Levy rants in person. And, as usual, the subject of her rant is the potential of the Internet and the degree to which it is not being exploited. "The really sad thing is that nobody is doing anything nearly as interesting as *Word*—I wish somebody would try to kick our ass," says Levy, who produced her own digital magazine *Electronic Hollywood* (distributed via floppy disk), which evolved into Billy Idol's *Cyberpunk* (a floppy disk that tied into his album of the same name) and provided a framework for the pop culture CD-ROM *Blender*. "Once the Internet came out, I knew that I would not do a CD-ROM [magazine]. CD-ROM is an interim technology. It's a storage device being used as a distribution format. That's stupid unless you want to do animation with video—which you will soon be able to transmit over the Internet anyway."

More importantly—in the long run at least—from an advertiser's point of view, the Internet is a much better environment for the peddling of products. Not only does advertising on the Internet give clients direct access to consumers (who can easily respond to an ad or product via e-mail) but it also allows advertisers to customize their messages. This is something that Saab, which promotes its automobiles on *Word*, has become particularly attuned to. "We are developing a special ad for Saab," says Levy who not only designs pages for *Word* but also for advertisers and outside clients who have included NBC, London Records, and IMG Agency. "It will personalize the ad for people who want to find out about specific Saab cars. They can click on it and see all the different colors and features that are available. There are so many advantages to advertising on the Web."

Working with this still burgeoning medium, however, also involves a bit of reconsideration on the parts of advertisers. "The problem is that you can't think of advertising on the Internet inside of a print model," says Carey Earle, *Word*'s director of marketing, the weariness in her voice revealing how often she has dealt with this issue. "Advertisers wonder how many impressions will be made and they think in very traditional terms. By doing that, though, you don't take advantage of the medium. Our new approach to advertisers is that we should start thinking in terms of business opportunities. I believe that the next level [on the Internet] is going to be about sponsoring events and activities, electronic concerts, and various services that address the wired community."

Earle likens the most effective Internet advertising to what happens when a corporation like Philip Morris decided to build a playground for inner city children: It promotes the company, builds good will, and remains elegantly unobtru-

sive. "Advertising on the Internet has to be value added," says Eric Blum, account director at Modem Media, an advertising agency that specializes putting corporate messages on the Internet. "You need to provide positive branding without leaving a bad taste in the consumer's mouth."

One client who has managed to do that successfully is Zima, the alcoholic beer-like drink marketed by Coors and advertised with its logo banded across opening pages on *Word*. The drink's Web site, where the real advertising takes place, doubles as a guide to bars and restaurants in different cities across the country. "We're [soft selling] a message to people and working in a forum that allows for two-way dialogue," explains Blum. "Every week the Web site generates 75 to 100 letters from readers and we respond to them individually. Plus there's some affinity for the medium, and that gives the brand a lot of value."

Michael Goldberg has found record labels particularly keen to take advantage of online advertising's possibilities. Right from the start, music industry media buyers have understood the importance of padding advertising messages with value for readers. "For example," offers Goldberg, "there was the soundtrack for a movie called *Angus*, which featured a new Green Day song. The first 100 people to visit the site received an advance cassette of the album. As a result, hundreds of people spent enough time there to fill out a form that had to be e-mailed to the record label. Think of how much time they were spending in this advertising environment, and you realize that it's a lot more time than somebody would devote to a print ad. The [sound] excerpts are long enough that you get a feel for the song, and you can't wait to get their new album."

As advertisers become more comfortable with the Internet, Webzine business is expected to boom. Technology is making the medium more accessible, and numerous online products are being sketched out on designers' pressure sensitive tablets. Jaime Levy and Icon International, which owns *Word*, are preparing to launch several new Internet titles (subject matter will run the gamut from personal finance to extreme sports) and she already views the company as an alternative AOL. "This is really a hoot right now," says Levy who jokingly calls herself "the Kurt Cobain of multimedia." "I remember working 40 hours a week, designing boring jewelry catalogs. Then I would go home, get drunk, and do my electronic magazine. Nobody paid much attention to it then; now I get my picture in *Newsweek*." She hesitates for a beat, considers her cyber celebrity, and adds, "I'm laughing really hard right now." ■

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