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What Is New Media? Why Should You Care?

"So what do you do?" This most common question, the classic follow-up to "Hello, my name is [insert name here]," seems harmless enough to most people. But they probably aren't in new media.

Yes, some of us might be content to say we're in advertising, computer programming, graphic design, maybe even Web development. For me, I've finally begun condensing my answer to a simple, albeit vague and inaccurate, phrase: "I do Internet stuff." Maybe that's why I like being involved with the Philadelphia Area New Media Association (PANMA), the hippest new division of the Eastern Technology Council. When I go to meetings, I don't have to fret over that dreaded question. They get it.

Of course not everyone gets it. In my role as president of PANMA, I am constantly asked the question "What is new media?" Here, with great risk of offending many, is my answer.

New vs. Old

First, let's distinguish between new media and old, or traditional, media. The term, new media, did not originate with the widespread use of the Internet as a commercial medium. In fact, it dates back several years to the advent of electronic, interactive media such as CD-ROMs and other multimedia communications. The term differentiates these media from traditional media, such as print, radio and television. Of course, these interactive media soon began competing with and merging with Internet-based communications, such as Web sites and more recently streaming audio and video and voice communication.

Of course, the new vs. old dichotomy doesn't hold up well, since all of these media seem to be coming together using Internet technologies. It is no surprise, then, that many of the members of PANMA are from the "traditional" side of the industry, from ad agencies, television stations and graphic-design firms.

Growth and Impact of New Media

New media did not originate with the Internet. It dates back to the advent of electronic, interactive media.

What I really enjoy about working in new media is the sense of excitement about what we're doing. There's a feeling among my colleagues that we are on the ground floor of an industry preparing to explode. This is especially true in the context of other technology companies, in which electronic commerce, Internet and interactive technologies are a growing part of what we're all doing. The blending of new media and other technologies fueled the recent merger by the Eastern Technology Council, an association representing over 700 technology companies in the region, with PANMA, a group of 275 individuals. We hope that this marriage will benefit all and help the Philadelphia region become a major player in emerging media.

The industry has already grabbed the attention of the City of Philadelphia Commerce Department, innovatively led by Steve Mullin, where hundreds of regional companies are being tracked and surveyed. Many of Philadelphia's movers and shakers are looking to technology companies, particularly new-media companies, to spur economic growth approaching the new millennium and beyond. And the exponential growth in e-commerce and Internet advertising speak for themselves. Well, if you still aren't clear on the exact definition of new media, don't feel alone. The important thing you should know is that new media is here to stay.

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