

BUSINESS

WEDNESDAY, MAY 14, 2003

THE HARTFORD COURANT

PICTURE THIS!



MEDICALLY ACCURATE software animation is projected onto Leo Herbette, CEO of the Hartford software firm Exploria. Below, the firm's animation images depict nerve cells called neurons, left, and a protein in a cell membrane, right.

By **JOHN M. MORAN**
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Hartford Software Firm Makes Business Talks Visual

You are a blood cell zooming through arteries and veins.

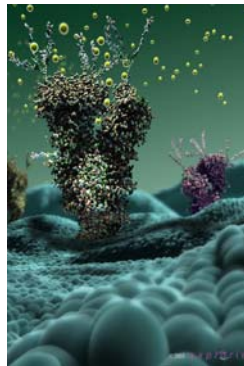
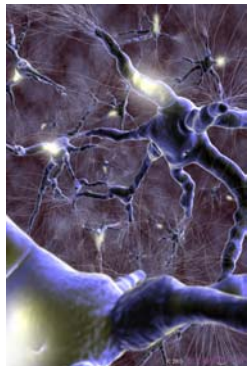
You are an atom combining with others to create a new molecule.

You are an experimental drug attacking an infection.

While doctors and scientists might readily visualize such things, the rest of us often struggle to picture what's happening at the microscopic level. But a Hartford-based software company, Exploria

LLC, believes it has a way to make it easy - one that could be worth millions to biotech and pharmaceutical companies, financial firms and others with complex stories to tell.

Exploria makes software tools that let companies put animations and video into their business presentations. Viewers get a vivid look at - and understanding of - everything from tiny chemical processes to complicated financial transactions.



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Software

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The resulting ability to communicate complex information can be valuable indeed when the stakes are high, as they often are for business deals.

"We're a visual communications company. We empower people to get their message across," said Leo Herbette, the company's founder and chief executive.

A former professor of medicine at the University of Connecticut Health Center, Herbette first used video animations to help students in his lectures understand medical interactions.

"When you're trying to teach students intricate things like how the body works, you can verbalize some things, but it's so much easier to show them," Herbette said.

Soon, the word got out to other professors and research partners who began asking Herbette to make similar animations for them. That eventually led Herbette to found the company in 1993 as Exploria Productions.

For several years thereafter, Exploria was primarily a small production company creating scientifically accurate animations for clients like Esperion Therapeutics, a biopharmaceutical company based in Ann Arbor, Mich. Roger Newton, Esperion's chief executive, said Exploria's animation has proven invaluable in communicating the company's ideas and helping it raise \$140 million in capital.

"Leo and his crew at Exploria have had a major impact on how well and how definitely we've been able to get our corporate message across," Newton said. "To show it visually by an animated approach has had a huge impact on helping people understand the science, which can bog people down -particularly investors."

But more recently, Exploria has also developed software able to dis-

play, transmit and update such presentations securely. Think of the Exploria's software as Microsoft PowerPoint on steroids, going far beyond the bullet-point slide shows now common at sales meetings, business conferences and college classrooms.

Exploria's software, which it calls its "Global Presentation System," also manages the transmission and updates of presentations.

Jay Ross, training director at Sankyo Pharma, a New Jersey-based drug company, said the ability to quickly update presentations and then distribute those updates to employees is an essential asset.

"We have sales representatives around the country," Ross said. "Our challenge is getting a standard, consistent training program out to everyone in the country with a demonstrated quality."

But it's not all science and biology. Plenty of other businesses also need to display complex information and update it often and securely.

For example, financial companies, such as Exploria client Marsh USA Inc., often need to push updated information to its representatives in the field. The company, a subsidiary of Marsh & McLennan, expects to use Exploria's technology to ensure its brokers get the latest marketing and financial information. The updates can simultaneously delete obsolete data, so brokers aren't working from outdated presentations.

Animated presentations created by Exploria for the BioBus, a mobile educational lab, also are being used to help middle school and high school students understand the science behind sickle cell anemia and lyme disease.

Exploria is privately held, and officials declined to reveal sales figures. But they said revenues are in the millions of dollars, grew by 50 percent last year and are on track to grow by even more this year. They said Exploria has been profitable since it was launched.

The company's client list already

numbers about three dozen and includes large pharmaceutical companies such as Bristol Meyers Squibb and Park Davis, and financial services firms such as CIGNA and The Hartford.

Walter Borden, Exploria's vice president for sales and marketing, says the company's proprietary software for display and delivery will fuel its future growth. "We've grown substantially over the last couple of years and we're on a significant growth path," he said.

The company's software products are aimed at corporate customers. Pricing runs from a few thousand dollars for the simplest system to as much as \$1 million for a full media library, management and delivery system.

Currently, Exploria employs 15 people in production and software development, but officials expect that number could double to 30 by the end of the year. Earlier this month, the company moved into 6,000 square feet of downtown office space at the corner of Trumbull and Asylum streets with options for more if it continues to grow.

Exploria's potential for rapid growth is quite real, according to Jeff Horn, executive director of Hartford's Beacon Technology Network, which helps young tech companies such as Exploria with fund-raising, partnerships, customers and sales.

"I clearly see them being over a \$100 million company in the next four or five years," said Horn, a forecast that comes in at the high end of the company's own estimates.

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