

## BUSINESS NEWS

## John Bentley in TV venture

BY JON ASHWORTH

NOW is comeback time for John Bentley, the controversial entrepreneur who introduced video rental stores to Europe more than a decade ago. He hopes to bring home shopping and other services to television sets across the land using telephone lines and a personalised "black box" decoder.

Viewcall Europe is seeking to raise £700,000 via an offer for subscription that will capitalise it at up to £4.8 million. Brokers to the issue

are Astaire & Partners. The money will fund trials of the Viewcall system, which will feed still pictures, text and sound down domestic telephone lines for display on television sets. Home shopping, games and competitions, home banking, local information and directory services are likely to be available.

Subscribers will be linked through a decoder box at a cost of about £3 a month. The service should be accessible to anyone with a telephone and

television, from January 1996. Mr Bentley, chairman of Viewcall Europe, said: "The idea of this unit is to make a very simple box available at home that anyone can use."

He created the concept of low cost internet on T.V. in 1993, financed and organised the development and assembly of a \$250 STB composed of different technologies (anti-flicker; fractals; thin client architecture; low cost processor) to bring to the world the first clear readable WWW fonts, colours and images on a T.V screen via standard PSTN / POTS copper telephone lines.

Perhaps most importantly, J.B. devised the vital marketing and financial concept of the need for a secure "gate" or "portal" linking Web sites to the customer to record all transactions. He also foresaw the need for simple easy to use hand held remote controls, obviating the need for URL's, and making access to the consumer's prime requirements on the Web, child's play. Viewcall was the first to solve the potential social gap between the hi-tech haves and have nots both in terms of learning curves and price. J.B. presented the Viewcall product and set a market price of \$250 for the \$500 Net T.V. that the P.C world said couldn't happen, long before Larry Ellison or Oracle ever uttered a word about network computers (N.C's) or before Web T.V. (now purchased by Microsoft for \$425m) even existed! [See Web TV link](#)

Where is Viewcalls Net TV technology now? It was absorbed by America Online in April 1998 for use in the USA; although Viewcall Canada (owned by Manitoba Telecom) operates across Canada. [See link](#)

J.B.'s visionary gut feel comes from a history of exploiting new information technologies and media with which he has been associated in the 80's and 90's. From starting Europe's first and largest video rental distribution chain, (Intervision PLC), in 1980; to inventing the first on-line gambling; to point to multi-point global fax distribution by satellite in 1990, (Faxcast Corporation); and to financing the worlds first E-mail venture in 1984 (Wordnet International); all publicly held organisations.

In the 70's J.B. built a major entertainment / information conglomerate from scratch acquiring 36 companies by merger and acquisition in three years, half of them publicly listed. They included British Lion Films and Shepperton Studios (Britain's largest movie corporation), Mills and Allen, the worlds largest outdoor advertising corporation outside America and the largest UK owned advertising agency, Dorlands.

By which time J.B. appeared as the youngest entry on merit in the UK's Who's Who? An attempt to buy Express newspapers group (then Britain's largest) and the New York Plaza hotel chain (Sonesta) was outflanked in 1973 by a bid for J.B.'s Barclay Securities group of companies, making him an overnight multimillionaire aged 32. After funding one of the U.K.'s main political groups he abandoned British politics in disgust by the mid 70's, and took time off owning and operating one of Europe's largest hunting estates.

J.B.'s interests now are politics by the people, (not for the people) via the Internet, downsizing the power of major political and media groups, by freedom of all information, and internet global trading to reduce taxation. A Net T.V in every home. The politics of Libertarianism and the pursuit of humanism. Democracy does work and internet access for all must be its final arbiter. Other interests include power boating and sailing, skiing, riding, and the future. Married three times with five children, J.B. has lived in New York, LA, Scotland, the South of France, Paris, Australia, Switzerland, Sweden, and lately London. J.B. is referenced in Marquis', Whos Who in the World, Who's Who in Finance & Industry, Who's Who in America,