Marine Money's "Official Guide to Ship Registries Online" : Commercial Publishing Gumming up the Flow of Maritime Information -- for a Profit

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A Phd student came to the reference desk not long ago, asking if we had a more recent edition of the *Guide to international ship registers and ship management services*, by Lloyd's Ship Manager. He handed me the 2000 edition of the annually issued catalog of flag states with open registries. Under each state was typically a two page entry of facts that would be useful in determining if it was the right place to register a particular vessel, organized generally under the following headings:

- Principal laws applicable to ship registration
- International conventions adopted
- Port state control
- Registration requirements
  - Age
  - Surveys
  - Ownership
- Procedure for ship registration
- Contacts
- Parallel registration
- Mortgages
Each entry also included a short narrative of the founding of the registry, and often charts showing historical performance in terms of number of vessels, tonnage and how well their registrants fared on average under Port State regimes (e.g., detention rates).

Lloyd's *Guide*, published in association with the International Shipping Federation, was by no means comprehensive, considering it only listed open registries, but then, the likely customer for such a publication would probably have been looking for a flag of convenience anyway. Considering its intentionally limited coverage, this paper-based data set was a fairly current, and easy to navigate source of information. Still, for the maritime researcher, the inclusion of *all* the world's registries would have proven useful in deriving correlations between registration standards and vessel performance. And for vessel owners with multi-national ties, a unified source of registry information would have offered considerable convenience when weighing flag options.

But to answer the student's question, no, the library did not have any newer issues. After searching several sources, including *WorldCat*, I began to suspect that the publication had ceased not long after 2000. When I searched "ship registries guide" in Google, the first link was to the *Official Guide to Ship Registries Online & International Shipping Review Online*.

This online version is published by US-based Marine Money, and boasts of being the publication group's "most comprehensive guide yet," with fees, regulations and contacts from over 100 flag states. It was designed, according to the home page, to put "up to date information for the world's Ship Registers at your fingertips," and even went so far as to predict "Savings of up to $50,000 per ship per year when you comparison shop using the Guide."

Having taken a subscription ($500) on behalf of our researcher, I have absolutely no idea how any of Marine Money's claims can be maintained. The Guide indeed lists entries for over 100 flag states, but the presentation of data, and the amount and type of data contained, is wildly inconsistent. Each flag state gets its own site -- consisting of a page or series of pages linked by menus, but in the case of many states, the site provides only a sample of information, with links directing users to various agency pages for further details. The link to Gambia directs users to a PDF of pages 145-146 from the 2002 print edition!

In some cases, the entries are outright laughable. Clicking the "Introduction" link under Tunisia, for instance, yields the following information "About the flag":

- Registration fees
- Manning requirements

This "Lorem ipsum" text is known in the graphical design business as "greeking" -- the filler text that page layout experts and web designers use when building style sheets to ensure uniformity of typeface, font size, spacing, etc., across the document or site. The error is even more comical when one considers how basic and immature the style actually is. To all appearances, the Guide's web pages look like a slight modification of Google Sites, which is included in the Google Apps suite and is intended for simple intranet-like web sites maintained by an organization's non-technical end users. Going to the trouble of greeking on a Google Site design would be tantamount to hiring a typesetter to print a shopping list. This at least helps explain why it costs five hundred dollars for something so simple.

Given such inconsistencies in content and presentation, it is hard to fathom how the online Guide could be used for "comparison" shopping. Other than not having to take it physically off the library shelf, the online version offers no extra convenience for the vessel owner looking to register. There are only two ways to get at the data: One, clicking a map of continents and clicking a country; or Two, clicking a letter of the alphabet and clicking a country. As with the print edition, one has to start with the flag, take notes, find another flag, take notes, etc. There is no searching, no filter options, no results formatted in tables that would facilitate real comparisons.

The left side of the home page, a space conventionally used for link menus, has a list of content that is supposedly included for each state:

- Introduction
- Shipowner eligibility
- Company formation
- Taxation
- Registration & documentation
- Bareboat charter registration
- Vessel eligibility & survey requirements
- Crewing
- Mortgages
- Fees
- Contacts
Organizing the site in this way, in the form of hypertext links, would make it more useful, but in fact, this list is not only not a menu of links, it is not even computer-readable text. The whole front page is an image, with a few clickable points -- continent or alphabet. So cutting edge, 1993!

It is difficult to verify Marine Money's claim to be the most current data available. But the Guide's simplistic public interface casts doubt on the likelihood of the back end sophistication that would be needed to maintain such an assertion. My guess is its maintainers simply copied and stylized what they could from web sites of flag registries, and where feasible or necessary, used the information from the old LSM publication. There only reason this site could be considered current is that the flag registry information does not change frequently.

In order to be truly up to date, however, the site should offer the appropriate representatives of each flag state an account and a convenient means of entering their own data through standardized web forms. But, as this blog never tires of repeating, if the originators of maritime data were to maintain their information in this manner, it would not justify the subscription costs demanded by maritime publishers. Instead of exacting five hundred USD per year per subscriber, there would be a one-time expense to get the database up and running, and maintenance costs could be paid for at a small fraction of the current rate. Perhaps they could even be paid entirely through advertising and offered freely to the public on the open web. Such a product might well save ship registrants considerable aggravation, possibly money as well, but at least as importantly, it would put useful, affordable tools in the hands of maritime researchers.

This idea raises the question of whether there are enough contacts among the alumni of the World Maritime University in the right positions to supply this data if the WMU Library built the interface and provided the storage. It would be an ideal project to test the possibilities of "crowd-sourced" data in the maritime world. Flag states, particularly those with open registries, would presumably have an interest in seeing this data kept up to date as a service to their customers.

In the meantime, the online Guide, at $500 per year, is what those customers currently have at their disposal, with --and I quote-- "the caliber of reporting, content and service you've come to expect from Marine Money publications."

If that is indeed the caliber you have come to expect in maritime information resources, don't forget to "Like" their page on Facebook.