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Online charter game not over yet

LevelSeas is pushing to dominate the dry cargo online chartering market through its major shareholders, but there are still a number of other players in contention with new developments.

LevelSeas may claim "game over" but others are not so sure. They are taking a less aggressive attitude by adding benefits to current industry practices that they hope operators and brokers will find easier to adopt.

Strategic Software, with a record of building computer products for the industry, is pinning hopes in the dry field on collaboration with Japanese-backed E-Jan to build a global position.

Hong Kong-based Asia Shipping Market, operating for six months, is focussing on parcelling and positioning cargoes for handysized and smaller bulkers via a patented part-cargo computerised search formula.

Meanwhile, Heidenreich Marine is taking an even less intrusive approach by extending its online tanker questionnaire service to dry owners.

None of the three ventures attempt to take fixture negotiations online.

From February, Strategic will launch a post-fixture module to its 60-40 joint venture with E-Jan. The currently pre-fixture cargo/ship posting system allows brokers to make documentation processing cheaper and more efficient.

Subscriptions on the pre-fixture side range downwards from \$250 per month per user depending on subscription volumes and will be \$400 per month for the post-fixture module.

The dry market is crying out for the post-fixture functionality, says Strategic IMX business development director Peter Rygaard Andersen.

There is a lot more detail at that level than in the tanker market, for which the IMX online product was originally developed, he says.

Owners and operators from outside the 600-company pool of existing Strategic clients are using the dry system, Andersen says. E-Jan gives a major inroad to the Asian dry market via its 27 shareholders. They include five Japanese operators: NYK, MOL, K Line, Taiheiyo Kaiun and Shoei Kisen, plus six trading houses and 13 brokers.

Information is shared only between parties that have agreed to do so.

Asia Shipping Market is taking a different approach limited to the intra-Asian market and involving personal input to sort out relevant cargoes and ships from the mass of information sent to its forum.

Managing director Matthew Canham, a former broker in Asia, says it does not push members to negotiate online but provides details to both sides to help offline fixture completion.

"Orders are not recirculated. We refuse to inundate our members with e-mails," he says. "The system and our staff only send out a suitable cargo or time charter when it specifically matches the vessels' open position, capability and preferred direction."

Asia Shipping Market reckons more than 200 examples of workable business are sent to members every day.

Canham adds that 1,765 companies visited its website in September, looking at over 93,000 pages. Each visit lasted an average 37 minutes, indicating they are using the facility and not just looking at it, he says.

Heidenreich is treading an even less expansive path, but focussing on the detail of eliminating repetitive chores for owners and operators.

Its new QBulk.com Internet site is developed from its previous Q88 tanker tool and offers owners automatic questionnaire completion for charterers and terminals.

Vice-president Fritz Heidenreich says the dry sector requires even more forms than the 117 it has on the tanker field in Q88. They are used by 100 subscribers representing 860 vessels, he claims.

QBulk will be free until July 2002, after which subscribers will be charged fees similar to those on the tanker site, around \$300 a year per vessel.

Discounts will be available for large fleets.

As in the wet sector, dry operators will have to decide what game it is they want to play online before anyone can say: "It's all over now!"