

# Information on RMs: there is a better way!

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As readers of this column know, good quality measurements are essential: they underpin the QC of products and processes, both in manufacturing and in (applied) research. Reliable analyses are needed to ensure compliance with European and national regulations. As one EC website puts it, "reliable analytical measurement is needed to support European industry in developing a sustainable and environmentally responsible economic growth".

Reference materials are used for within- and between-sample quality control, using Control Charts and they form the basis of many PT schemes. Certified Reference Materials (CRMs) and especially matrix CRMs are used widely to test accuracy, to validate methods and to assure traceability and inter-comparability between laboratories.

It will not be a surprise to many *SE* readers that the availability of reference materials is not as good it should be. Research carried out by the Jenks Partnership Ltd in 2002 and presented at the BERM Symposium in 2003 showed that RMs and CRMs are not always easy to obtain: 71% of the users sampled said they had problems identifying the right CRM for their application. Many, 27%, think there are not enough RMs listed in catalogues and a damning 62% of users are frustrated by both a lack of information from producers and the time taken to get it when requested. Even when the right information and CRM had been identified, the problems do not stop: 39% of the sample claimed that they waited a month or more to get their RM or CRM.

When asked where the information and training should come from, perhaps surprisingly, 36% the users did not want to see instrument suppliers involved. The

rest considered that the producers, suppliers and the published literature should meet their need.

Given this clear demand for more information and training, we probed to see where this should come from. A majority, 62%, said the CRM producers and suppliers should offer this information and not all expect to get it for free: 10% said they would be willing to pay the producers and 21% would purchase training information in the form of interactive web programs, CD ROMs and the like.

So a need exists: the question has always been: "who is going to meet it?" At last, the European Commission, through the 5th Framework Research Program, has made a major breakthrough by funding Contract Growth G7RT-CT-2002-05104. It has provided investment funding to develop a structure that will go a long way to satisfying the demand for information by funding the new EU Virtual Institute for Reference Materials (VIRM).

The project started work at the beginning of 2003 and the first product, the VIRM website, opened on 31 March 2004. It is at [www.virm.net](http://www.virm.net). The next phase, the e-newsletter, will be launched in May.

The mission of the VIRM is to improve the QC of products and processes by encouraging, catalysing and facilitating the increased use of RMs throughout Europe. It will do this by establishing a "Knowledge Network" and a facility to encourage the interaction between all stakeholders in the field of RMs. The result – the VIRM will be the meeting place for the European reference material community. It will also become a major disseminator of information, advice and training on RMs for producers, distributors, users, service providers and research organisations in EU and NAS countries.

Unlike many EU-funded projects the VIRM will go on after the EU "seed capital" is used up. It will do this by building during the EU-funded phase to:

- Achieve a financially stable and sustainable Institute based on
  - a low fixed cost operation
  - optimum use of IT and communications technology,
- Demonstrate best practice in web-enabled knowledge transfer.
- Establish a legal structure as a non-profit organisation (Association sans but lucratif, ASBL) during 2004.

In the future the VIRM will develop into:

- A multi-functional entity involving a knowledge and expert centre on RMs
- An information centre using advanced Communication and IT (ICT)
- A meeting place for RM stakeholders
- A research broker and training centre
- A centre focused on harmonisation and standardisation, exploring future (C)RM perspectives.

So the VIRM will act as both "glue", between Members in the Network and the RM community and "grease"; smoothing the dissemination, exchange of ideas and concepts. In this way the VIRM will link RM users in laboratories, including those from industry and SMEs, to the science associated with the development of methods and production.

This is an historic and unique development which must succeed, but it cannot do so if the European analytical community does not support it. At this stage all you have to do is visit the web site and register. It is free and painless!

Why bother, many will think? Do so and you will be contributing the most important development in the RM community this century.

Do it now: go to [www.virm.net](http://www.virm.net) and register!