

Desktop publishing steals the show at Comdex

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Desktop publishing dominated the software offerings at the Fall Computer Dealers Exposition as graphical page-layout software was unveiled for the IBM PC family of microcomputers. No other area came close in popularity at the Comdex/Fall show, held Nov. 10-14 in Las Vegas, Nevada. The conference, which drew about 80,000 people to see nearly 1200 exhibitors, is the major product exhibit of the year.

Artificial intelligence, a recent headline-grabbing area, was barely evident. It trailed techniques to integrate the many incompatible data formats and protocols in MS-DOS environments.

The number of new software products appeared to be lower than in past shows, but more than in 1985. Regular visitors to the conference attributed the lower numbers of new products to a squeeze in research budgets caused by the computer industry recession of the last two years. However, they noted that the atmosphere was much more positive than at the 1985 show. (Noteworthy Comdex products are described in the New Products department on p. 80.)

The desktop publishing offerings fell into three broad categories:

- WYSIWYG programs (\$100-\$300) with limited layout capabilities driving dot-matrix printers for small applications like flyers and internal news sheets,
- sophisticated word processors (\$300-\$600) that drive laser printers and typesetting machines (some with preview modes) for simple documentation and reports, and
- WYSIWYG programs (\$500-\$900) with extensive layout and text-formatting, basic text-editing, and graphics import capabilities that output bitmapped pages to laser printers and typesetting machines for newsletters, brochures, and small-volume magazines.

Top contenders. In the high-end category, two products emerged as the leading contenders for a dominant page-layout product in the MS-DOS world: Aldus Corp's Pagemaker and Ventura Software's Ventura Publisher. Both have strong backing.

Pagemaker has been available for Apple Macintosh PCs for more than a year, and the IBM version was scheduled to be released by Jan. 1. Aldus has also entered into an alliance with Hewlett-Packard (whose Laserjet printers account for about 70 percent of the laser printer market) and Microsoft (inventor of MS-DOS and the new Windows graphical operating environment that Pagemaker runs under).

Ventura is backed by Xerox Corp. and began shipping in mid-October. It uses Digital Research's Gem environment.

In the Mac market, the dominant Pagemaker has now been challenged by Letraset's Letraset software. Although Letraset is best known for its rub-down lettering and graphic art supplies, it entered the desktop publishing market because those primary business are endangered by laser printers and page-layout software, a company official said.

Dealer appeal. The appeal to computer distributors is that, for Macintosh

dot-matrix printers (for the rest), color monitors and EGA color-graphics cards (for many programs, high end or not), Hercules monochrome-graphics cards (for the others), accelerator boards (definitely for XTs and nice for ATs), and mice (for everyone).

Realizing this, most entrants in the MS-DOS desktop publishing market at Comdex were hardware companies, such as Cordata, NEC, and Canon, who bundled their laser printers or graphics monitors with page layout software like Pagemaker and Ventura (or gave a choice of software). AT&T Information



dealers at least, desktop publishing sells Macs. One East Coast distributor said his chain's sales of Macs tripled in the year following Pagemaker's release.

Dealers don't expect their PC sales to triple because MS-DOS PCs have already become the dominant microcomputer in business. But now — with color monitors, graphics cards, coprocessors, mice, and graphical operating environments — IBM PC AT-class machines (and XT-class computers with accelerator boards) can handle page-layout software and other applications once dominated by the Mac.

That led one market analyst at a Comdex desktop publishing seminar to predict that, by the end of 1989, 70 percent of desktop publishing would be done on MS-DOS machines, compared to the 70 percent done on the Mac today. The two dozen panelists, including those from Apple, agreed.

Having more desktop publishing programs on MS-DOS machines means that more customers must buy hardware: laser printers (for the high end),

Systems also got its feet wet. Using a sign labeled "desktop publishing," it attracted people to see its Image Director package, which accepts graphics and text via local area networks and outputs merged pages on laser printers.

However, Signe Ostby, marketing director for Software Publishing Corp., told the desktop publishing session that "the hardware is in place — but barely. When we move to 386 [Intel's new 80386 processor] and DOS [Version] 5 is when you're going to see it take off."

Standards. With the move to the MS-DOS world, standards have become an issue. The IBM PCs' open architectures invites competing approaches. "How do we get all these standards to coexist? Especially when people are trying to differentiate their products?" asked Craig Slayter, president of Softstyle, a firm specializing in device drivers.

There are two competing page description languages (Adobe's Postscript and Imagen's DDL) and two competing operating environments

(Microsoft's Windows and Digital Research's Gem).

For Hewlett-Packard, the competing description languages proved to be embarrassing, since one company division formed a desktop publishing alliance with Aldus (who uses Postscript in its Pagemaker) while another division adopted the rival DDL to drive the Laserjet and circumvent that printer's limited font and size selection. Aldus has since announced that it will also support DDL — as will Ventura.

The operating environment competition is less easily circumvented. The environments let various programs run in several windows at once, and they let data be shared among the programs (since the data formats used by all are the same). Thus, a graphics editor could run in one window, a text editor in another, and a layout program in a third — text and graphics being exchanged among them.

Programs running in DOS — all the popular, powerful word processors that the page-layout programs accept as input — cannot run in the environment, so their text must be imported into a program that does run in the environment. But programs that run in Windows will not run in Gem and vice versa — and cannot as yet be imported.

Alliances, such as the Microsoft/Aldus/Hewlett-Packard one, will help create standards. Indeed, Apple considers such alliances key to its success, desktop publishing marketing manager John Scull said during the panel session.

The standard interface for the MS-DOS desktop publishing software is similar to the Macintosh interface: pull-down menu bars, icons, and option columns. But, Skisoft president Ken Skier reminded the audience, "The typical [MS-DOS] PC user uses a PC."

In the MS-DOS environment, icons and pull-down menus are foreign. The keyboard is the primary interface. MS-DOS software should use the interface familiar to the users, not import a foreign environment's attributes, he argued.

Whatever is developed in the near term, however, the panelists agreed that IBM could at any time disrupt existing standards by coming out with a fully or partially proprietary desktop publishing system, causing current systems to go the way of CP/M. IBM recently started a new division expressly for desktop publishing.

Down the line. Many panelists predicted what future systems would have. All agreed that the MS-DOS machine was rapidly closing the gap with 32-bit workstations like the Sun

and Apollo and could support higher resolution, nearly removing the differences between page-layout software output and typesetter output. For example, a color graphics chip set using the 80386 chip increases image-computation power 18 to 24 times more than an IBM PC (with the 8086 chip), said Gordon Campbell, president of Chips and Technologies, Inc.

In the nearer term, Adobe's John Warnock saw an increased library of fonts. The limited number of available fonts now (about 30 type families, or 100 separate type faces) makes it difficult to create out-of-the-ordinary advertising and magazine designs. He also saw support in Postscript soon for color, slide making, and Japan's Kanji lettering.

Networking will become increasingly important as desktop publishing moves from single PCs to the whole office, following the publishing work flow from input to editing to layout to output, suggested Paul Brainerd, Aldus's president.

Taking networking a step further, Nat Goldhaber, president of Centram Systems, said such networking must include transparency between different operating systems: IBMs and Macs must be able to exchange ASCII data without the user needing to think about what operating system the needed data is in. Programs like Microsoft Word and Pagemaker could exchange their non-ASCII, formatted data because both programs have implementations on both MS-DOS and Macintosh PCs, he said. Such transparency would let people use whichever operating system they felt most comfortable in.

Designers' role. All the panelists cautioned that companies expecting to buy page-layout software and fire graphics designers should reconsider. "You'll lose quality if you eliminate the graphics designer. They're still important," said Software Publishing's Ostby.

One panelist even used slides to show the result of nondesigners' applying their ignorance. The slides showed ungainly, busy, and difficult-to-read brochures and newsletters produced with page-layout software. There's a danger of amateurs making ugly, garish documents, said John Meyer, president of Ventura Software.

Several people echoed his sentiments. Templates and clip art will be vital in ensuring that "design doesn't get in the hands of the unwashed masses," said Apple's Leslie Liedtka. "No better does 'garbage in, garbage out' apply than in desktop publishing," said Lawrence Magid, vice president at the Seybold Group, a publishing consultant.