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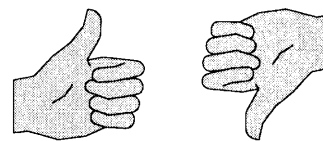
TECHNOLOGY ALERT

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What's Hot

What's Not : Comdex 96 -



by Roman H. Kepczyk, CPA and Janis Monroe, CPA

Roman is a principal with Boomer Consulting in Tempe, Arizona. He is a member of the AICPA Information Technology Research Subcommittee. Jan is president and founder of MicroMash in Englewood, Colorado, and is also a member of the Information Technology Research Subcommittee. They spent several days running through the incredible expanse of computer technology at this year's Comdex, only to get a taste for the technologies that will be showcased in the year ahead. In this Alert, they discuss the technologies impacting the accounting profession, which include: DVD drives, document management products, hand-held PCs and everything touching the Internet.

Digital Versatile Disk Technology

Numerous vendors showcased Digital Versatile Disk (DVD) technologies for distribution of large sources of data. DVD is the latest CD-ROM compression/writing technology that stores up to 8.5 Gigabytes of data on a single CD. This technology is now being introduced in the entertainment market for music and movies but should be available in the accounting industry to augment the CD-ROM towers currently in place. One DVD disk can hold an entire CD-ROM Tax or Research series at a cost expected to be under \$2,000 by the end of next summer. Large accounting information providers such as Research Institute of America and Commerce Clearing House are expected to buy into this technology early as it will reduce production and installation costs for their products.

Phase Dual Drives

This product is a new and improved version of optical disk storage of which Panasonic is the manufacturer (regardless of brand name). These new drives are known as "PD" drives or Phase Dual drives as they can read standard CD-ROM disks (Data, Audio, Photo-CD) and read/write optical disks with a capacity of 650Mb. The optical disks are rated for 500,000 write cycles (so a disk should be reusable for a very long time) and the data should be readable for 30 years after its written. For both CD-ROM and optical disks the speed is equivalent to a 4X CD-ROM, even when writing to the optical disks. This new drive is not a replacement for CD-R drives which create standard CD-ROMs, and they can not read DVD. These drives are available now and cost approximately \$800 to \$1,000. The optical disk cartridges are priced at around \$50. For backup, multimedia authoring, and archival, this new drive is hard to beat.

Document Management Products

Document management products from scanners and digital copiers to image management and optical character recognition (OCR) software were also highlighted. Personal scanners such as the Visioneer Paperport Vx have been improved this year with the addition of much stronger image management software (Paperport Deluxe) and enhanced OCR through Xerox's TextBridge product. Xerox also blurred the office copier/printer lines with the introduction of the digital scanner/copier/laser printer that connects to the network. Hewlett Packard showcased the LaserJet 5si Mopier which is a 24ppm printer built to handle high production (3,100 sheet capacity) and has a duplex printing feature. The Mopier produces mopies or "multiple original prints," which can be printed on both sides of the paper, collated and stapled, all with a few simple mouse clicks. While the Mopier cannot make traditional photocopies, it can reduce the workload of a departmental copier while using less electricity. These products foreshadow the merging of the copier/printer products so it would be advisable not to get locked into any long-term copier contracts.

Hand-held PCs

Microsoft released its Windows CE software for handheld PCs and brought many vendors such as Casio, Compaq, NEC, HP and Hitachi with working products. The CE software is a "lite" version of Windows 95 that includes stripped down versions of Excel, Word, an Internet browser, and other tools such as calendar, contact and task manager as well as a link to the desktop PC. The CE software allows for changes made on the office network or from the handheld PC to be "synchronized" and updated at both places. (See Technology Alert No 97-1 for further information on Windows CE) Other products such as the US Robotics Pilot link to existing calendar, task and contact management software on the network and also synchronize that information. These products will eventually replace the pocket calendars and daytimers that most accountants carry.

Windows'97, Office'97, and the New Microsoft Mouse

Windows'97 by itself isn't a big deal - it's supposed to be faster, more reliable, and have some added features over Windows'95. The big reason for buying Windows'97 is to run Office'97. The Office'97 suite consists of Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Schedule, and Outlook. The professional version adds the Access database application. Each of these has new functionality. Most of the new features are related to ease-of-use and are well thought out (some were so good that spontaneous applause erupted from the audience when the new feature was shown.) For example; previously you had to edit each cell, inserting whatever number of spaces you wanted the text indented. Now its a single command to indent the text in a range of cells. Integration of Office applications is now much smoother and intuitive than before (i.e., inserting data or a graph from Excel into a Word document).

Office'97 contains a new application named "Outlook". This product integrates all the Office applications and adds functionality to create a system that can easily replace whatever personal information manager (PIM) you may be using. Outlook is also a full MAPI (Messaging API) client, so it works well with all E-mail systems that support MAPI. Any item (appointment, task, contact) or document (Word, Excel, Access) can be related to any other items or documents as desired. If you have the time and the need you can link every item related to a task, appointment, etc., that you need and have almost instant access to all the pieces by accessing any single piece. Report generation is included as well.

But wait there's more...The new mouse with Windows/Office'97 adds new, and very useful functionality to all the Office applications. The new mouse has a small "wheel" located between the right & left mouse buttons. This wheel can be spun to scroll through a document, clicked on to "zoom-in" or "zoom-out" the view of a document, and other functions. For large spreadsheets, databases, and documents this feature alone saves lots of time by not having to move to the scroll bar to scroll through the document (spreadsheet, database, ...)

Windows'97 and Office'97 master disks have been sent to manufacturing and should be on the store shelves this month.

Internet Applications

Internet applications touched virtually every product at Comdex. Microsoft Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator have pushed the capabilities of browser technology to such a point that Microsoft Office and Lotus SmartSuite have integrated those capabilities into many of their applications. Expect Windows'97 to incorporate heavy integration with Internet Explorer 4.0. Novell and Microsoft's network products also were heavy with Internet and Intranet capabilities.

Free Internet Services

The latest scheme on the Internet is "give away services," such as news, e-mail accounts, etc., that are free and charge advertisers for ad placements that users will see when using the service. Many of these services won't be available until the first quarter of this year, and whether they will be successful or not is not known, but they are worth checking out since the price is right. Examples of services include: News services - where you browse/search through sources from CNN, Wall Street Journal, NY Times, AP/UPI, weather channel or create your own custom newspaper or clipping service. They'll even notify you when something you're looking for appears. No charge to use the service - just sign up. E-Mail Accounts - Tired of having too many e-mail addresses? One service is offering "an e-mail account for the rest of your life" for free. So now when you change Internet providers you don't have to change e-mail addresses. Again sign up is required but the service is free. In the demonstrations at Comdex, the advertising was substantial, but since many online services charge for such things it could be worth it.

56 Kbps Modems for Normal Phone Lines

Several manufacturers have announced 56K modems, basically doubling the speed of the now standard 28.8 modem. The additional speed looks to make several existing technologies practical without needing ISDN phone lines: Video conferencing (several vendors were selling video conferencing hardware and software that used these new modems); virtual reality over the Internet (for which 28.8 was just too slow); and delivery of multimedia via the Internet without the long wait for which most of us don't have the patience. The down side is that the only way to guarantee that your 56K modem will be compatible with another modem is if they are from the same manufacturer. A standard is being hammered out, but is not yet official and different vendors' implementations can be incompatible until a standard is agreed on, which should be soon. Once a standard is agreed to, these modems will be "Hot!"

Large Flat Screen Displays

These new large monitors or flat panel displays (FPDs) are 2 to 4 inches thick, and 27" to 60" in diagonal, and use similar technology as in active matrix screens for notebook computers. They are meant to be hung on a wall and viewed from a distance. The display image looks very good and has the same viewing angle as their smaller cousins, the notebook displays. They are very expensive now and many of the very large models aren't available. The prices should come down in the next year or two. When the price becomes right, these screens may help the market for PCs as entertainment centers.

Flat screens in more normal sizes (15" to 21") are also available for those to whom desktop space is at a premium. These are expensive compared to the same size CRT monitor but the price gap is closing. If the manufacturers can get the price down close to that of a traditional CRT, these would be a smart buy (less space, no need to degauss (de-magnetize) the screen, consistent colors, no moving parts, etc.).

Integrated PC Systems

The latest trend in PC systems is to integrate the home entertainment center and the PC. These systems are standard PCs with extra goodies. Besides the "normal" PC components, they come equipped with a large (31" or bigger) monitor, built in TV tuner (a VCR can be attached), surround sound audio system, infrared keyboard & mouse (to use from your easy chair) and a remote control that acts similar to regular TV remotes. Since the normal CD-ROM drive in the PC can play music CD's and you can connect a cassette deck to the line in/out of the sound card, these configurations could replace your current home entertainment center. Whether these systems will be popular is yet to be seen. The major drawback is obvious - you can't work on the computer while the kids (or others) watch TV. On the other hand - most homes have at least two TVs so it may not matter. Those of us that are "real estate-challenged" will appreciate the fact that both computer and TV use the same CRT. Many of these new higher end PCs will create demand for the MMX Pentium chip from Intel causing a drop in prices on existing Pentium chips. This will allow many accountants to buy faster processors as the existing stock of chips is sold off early in the new year. Several major vendors are selling systems that fall into this category. Prices appear to be in the \$3,500 to \$5,000 range.

Conclusion

In the past, many of the front line technologies featured at Comdex did not hit the accounting market for a period of time, usually years, because of cost or stability issues. This is no longer true as superior products are hitting the market at an ever increasing pace. All the products listed above will impact our businesses and those of our clients within the next year. Those businesses that adopt the "change" mindset as a matter of course will be the successful companies of the future.

