Been there, did that: Tech-X New York (PC Expo)

PC Expo is now a part of Tech-X NY (CMP calls it TECHXNY, but that looks unpronounceable to me). The name has changed because the show has changed. It's no longer just about PCs. It's about technology — mainly business technology, but with lots of applications for home use and small office/home office (SOHO) use. ***This is the show mini-report. Those clients who ordered the full report will soon receive information about how to view the full report.***

In 2000, handheld computers were hot. They continued to be hot this year, with an added bit of technology: wireless.

More and less

That the show was smaller this year than in the past was no surprise. The Internet bubble blew up and the dot-coms that were everywhere in 2000 were nowhere in 2001. The show, which had expanded to fill virtually every corner of Javits Convention Center this year occupied just the main exhibit floor and didn't quite fill that. Strategically located curtains blocked off the back 100 feet or so of the hall and food vendors took up some booth spaces that would otherwise have been empty.

The lower level was still used for conference sessions and corporate command centers, but the lower-level exhibit halls were either dark or contained a job fair.

Upstairs, though, many more companies than usual had set up interview rooms and many of the people I interviewed said that they'd been contacted by more reporters than usual. Some had sessions scheduled non-stop from the beginning of the show until at least mid day on Thursday.

Reduce, recycle, reuse

It's probably more a sign of the economy than of any corporate environmental concern, but many large companies – ones that usually build new multi-level booths each year – came to the 2001 show with the same display that they used in 2000.

Surprising absences

Corel wasn't there. That shouldn't be particularly surprising. The company cancelled at the last moment a year ago. This year finances are a little better, but Corel elected to bypass PC Expo and to have an exhibit at Digital Focus on Monday evening. That's probably a better choice.

Adobe's presence seemed significantly less than in previous years. While Adobe has a very close association with the Mac community, the company is also a key player in website design and Windows users design a lot of websites.

I didn't see a big Symantec presence, either, and that's unusual. Symanted was an exhibit in either the Palm or Handspring pavilion, but no standalone Symantec presence.

It's a wireless world

Sprint PCS was there in force. So were other wireless providers and one of the primary manufacturers – Motorola.

Everybody seems to have something that's wireless. Bluetooth devices that were intended to be on the market at least a year ago will probably start being sold this year. The US cellular network will remain in disarray for at least the next several years, but more messaging, Internet-aware, and e-mail devices are available right now.

Some of the offerings from Motorola are about the size of Research in Motion's (RIM) Blackberry device, but offer more flexibility – including the capability to watch multiple e-mail accounts and to filter messages so that you receive only the messages you consider critical while you're on the road.

Companies are combining cell phones with PDAs and combining PDAs with cell phones. One even has a large (dare I say "clunky"?) device that features a small but clear 640x480 screen that allows full graphic viewing of websites, PDA functions, and a phone.

There's also an effort to speed wireless communication. In the US, the data transfer rate is pitifully slow so companies are trying to find ways to cache information on mobile devices and to use a variety of robust compression routines to improve performance.

20GB removable or DVD+RW?

Those who need a lot of storage space should be watching two technologies. The first is Iomega's Peerless drives that currently offer 10 and 20GB capacity. These are fast removable drives that would seem to be ideal for video production and audio production. The next generation will offer 20 and 40GB versions. Iomega has been off the mark with some recent offer-

ings, but Peerless looks good. They are magnetic storage drives that boast transfer rates up to 15 MB/sec (Firewire). The drives also support USB and SCSI so it'll work on just about any current computer.

While I couldn't do it, many people could back up their entire hard drive to a Peerless unit. Or you could store up to 20 hours of streaming video or thousands of MP3 files.

But DVD could ruin Iomega's party. Rewritable DVDs are coming to market at reasonable prices. The drives are around $1000 and the media (each disk capable of holding about 4 and a half GB) will probably sell in the $20 price range at first. Watch for that to drop quickly, though. DVDs arenlt as fast as Iomega's Peerless and the drive costs about three times what Iomega charges, but those who need a lot of storage will find their overall costs a lot lower with DVD.

Everyone will be a producer

Digital video has come to the desktop. Most new PCs and all new Macs have a Firewire port or two. Apple calls it "iLink", but it's still IEEE-1394. This is a fast data transfer connection that works well with both the Apple and Windows operating systems. Plug in a digital video camera and it becomes like a disk drive. No muss. No fuss.

Firewire will probably be the standard connection for video, but the new Universal Serial Bus standard (USB 2.0) is nearly as fast. The improved USB functionality means that increasing numbers of devices will be made available in USB models – current devices range from scanners and keyboard to mice and printers, from external disk drives and CD burners to handheld computer synchronization and floppy disk drives.

The beauty of both USB and Firewire is that they can theoretically support more than 120 devices. The practical limit will be determined by the types of devices you attach to either Firewire or USB ports. Trying to use a USB scanner, a USB printer, and a USB CD burner simultaneously would be a bad idea; running a USB mouse, keyboard, and floppy simultaneously wouldn't tax the system's resources.

Big news from off the show floor

Some years we see a lot of new technology. This wasn't one of those years. R&D has been cut back at some companies and the flow of new products was slower. But we saw a lot of evolutionary changes. We've seen rewritable DVDs move from theory to prototype. One manufacturer even handed out to members of the press "preliminary" DVD+R. (DVD+RW has been out for a while.)

The big news came on Thursday and it came from the federal appeals court that agreed that Microsoft had broken antitrust laws but that the judge who heard the case went so far out of bounds that the decision to break Microsoft into several companies had to be nullified. The case was sent back to the lower court with specific instructions that the judge who heard the original case can have nothing more to do with it. The seven judges ruled unanimously.

In fact, they seemed to comprehend that Microsoft's real threat was not to the browser market, but to alternative operating systems. As for the government's claim that Microsoft illegally tied its browser to Windows, the judges said that the Department of Justice must prove in a new trial that the browser market suffered an anticompetitive effect. ß

How NOT to move a site

Changing the way a website is set up requires a precise dance. One small oversight can lead to big problems.

When a friend of mine was hired to revise the copy in a company advertising materials and on their website, he brought me in as webmaster.

About 45 days later, we were ready to cut over to the new site. I'd written a long memo detailing how to ensure that the e-mail accounts would move from one server to another without problem. I've done this several times; it's not difficult, but the steps are precise and orderly.

Because the new site would be announced in early July and I would be at Tech-X NY from June 23 through June 30, we needed to make the change no later than June 18 to allow any problems that cropped up to be resolved.

I was focused on the website cut-over, on our attempts to get Network Solutions (my least favorite registrar) to change the routing tables, on preparing to leave for Tech-X, and on some other last-minute changes for other clients. In other words, information overload had set in.

Something was itching at the back of my mind Saturday and Sunday as the company's president and I wrestled Network Solutions. We finally convinced Network Solutions, but I went to bed with an itch at the back of my mind.

Scratching the itch

Monday morning, Network Solutions reported that the changeover was effective and I sent the president a victory message. **The message bounced**.

I knew immediately what the problem was, but fixing it would take the rest of that day and part of the next. The problem was that the mail exchange (MX) record had changed when the address (A) record changed. Mail was now being delivered to a server that had no accounts set up. Of course messages were bouncing. They had nowhere to go!

There was no quick, easy solution. Changing the MX record would take at least 24 hours to become effective, so I asked for a list of all e-mail accounts and started setting them up on the new server.

The next step was to start calling each of the account holders to explain how to set up their e-mail programs to communicate with the new server.

By 11 Monday evening, most of the problems had been solved. Most of the remaining problems were ironed out on Tuesday, but one didn't show up until I was in New York. That problem was resolved by my elder daughter, with a little guidance from me as I walked along Eighth Avenue in New York, traveling from one event to another.

Thank goodness for cell phones.

And smart daughters. ß