

# Random Thoughts

from William Blinn Communications

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TECHNOLOGY • MARKETING • COMMUNICATIONS

## Have You Ever Published a Desktop?

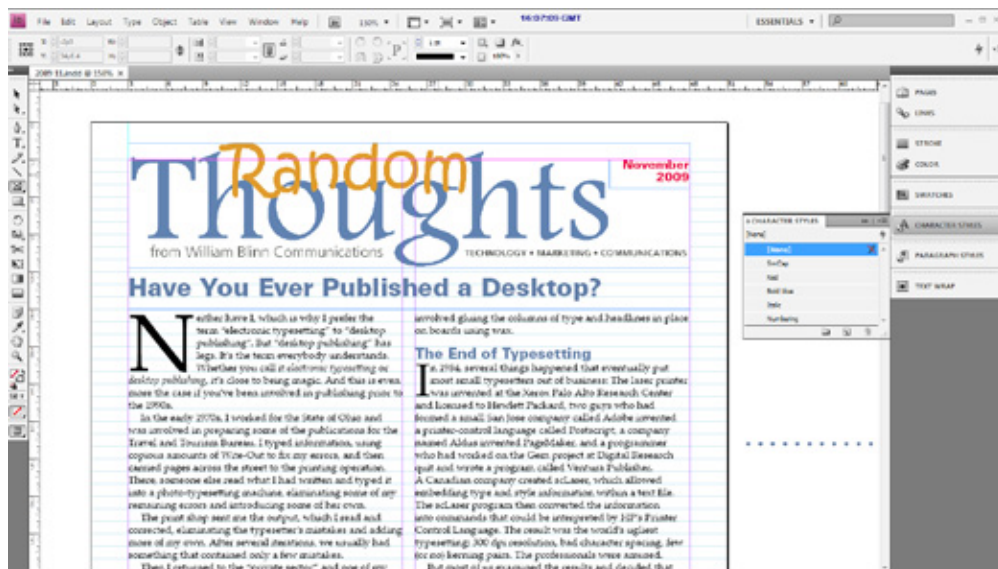
Neither have I, which is why I prefer the term “electronic typesetting” to “desktop publishing”. But “desktop publishing” has legs. It’s the term everybody understands. Whether you call it *electronic typesetting* or *desktop publishing*, it’s close to being magic. And this is even more the case if you were involved in publishing prior to the 1990s.

In the early 1970s, I worked for the State of Ohio and was involved in preparing some of the publications for the Travel and Tourism Bureau. I typed information, using copious amounts of Wite-Out to fix my errors, and then carried pages across the street to the printing operation. There, someone else read what I had written and typed it into a photo-typesetting machine, eliminating some of my remaining errors and introducing some of her own.

The print shop sent me the output, which I read and corrected, eliminating the typesetter’s mistakes and adding more of my own. After several iterations, we usually had something that contained only a few mistakes.

Then I returned to the “private sector” and one of my tasks was producing a newsletter. I still had to type the copy, but by then I was able to do it on a computer. The typesetter still couldn’t accept an electronic file, so I had to print the pages and deliver them; the typesetter had to type them.

The process was similar in that the typesetter would correct my errors and add some of his own, so the process took several iterations. I had developed a small program that would help me guess how many column-inches of text my typewritten pages would generate. The newsletter had about 40 column-inches available so I didn’t want to come back from the typesetter with 20 column inches or 60 column inches. Because of my program, I could usually be within a few column inches of what I needed.



Typeset text came back in one long column with the headlines delivered separately because they often spanned columns. I then determined whether there was too much copy or too little copy, thanked the typesetter for finding and fixing some of my errors, and marked errors introduced by the typesetter. Sometimes we’d get it right in two iterations that spanned 3 or 4 days, but occasionally the process would take more than a week. The final step involved gluing the columns of type and headlines in place on boards using wax.

### The End of Typesetting

In 1984, several things happened that put most small typesetters out of business: The laser printer had been invented at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center and licensed to Hewlett Packard, two guys who had formed a small San Jose company called Adobe invented a printer-control language called Postscript, a company named Aldus invented PageMaker, and a programmer who had worked on the Gem project at Digital Research quit and wrote a program called Ventura Publisher. A Canadian company created sLaser, which allowed embedding type and style information within a text file. The sLaser program then converted the information into commands that could be interpreted by HP’s Printer Control Language. The result was the world’s ugliest typesetting.

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Law of Cat Friendship Analysis: Cats are nature’s way of helping you detect the people you don’t want to know.

The professionals were amused by 300-dpi resolution, bad character spacing, and few (or no) kerning pairs.

But most of us examined the results and decided that the low quality was less important than the speed and flexibility. We stopped sending work to typesetters.

By 1990, laser printers were able to create output at 600 dpi and then 1200 dpi, which is (without a magnifying glass) indistinguishable from “real” typesetting. When the letterspacing and kerning problems were solved, do-it-yourself typesetting had the potential to equal the work turned out by the nation’s small type shops.

In the past 20 years, typesetting applications have continued to improve. So have word processing programs. People look at the capabilities of WordPerfect or Word and wonder why they need Quark XPress, Adobe InDesign, or Ventura Publisher. The high-end publishing applications may not be needed for every job, but it’s worth examining the workflow of your projects before making a decision.

Word processors are designed for letters, labels, and memos. They can be used with multi-column, multi-article, illustrated publications such as newsletters, but the inefficiencies are enough to remind me of the old days when I had to work with a typesetter. Publishing programs allow the user to save templates with ready-made “holes” into which articles are “poured”. Formatting a newsletter in a word processor may take several hours for every issue while formatting a newsletter in a professional publishing program will take several hours the first time and only a fraction of the time for subsequent issues.

## Your Choices Today

The “big 2” in publishing are Adobe InDesign and Quark XPress. I’ve never been much impressed by XPress and early versions of InDesign didn’t measure up to Ventura. But since about 2004, most of my design work has been done in InDesign. Even the latest version of InDesign still omits some features that Ventura users took for granted, but Ventura is a dead application.

- ADOBE INDESIGN is the application that any competitor must meet or beat.
- COREL VENTURA PUBLISHER (formerly by Xerox) could still be the best choice for long documents, but it doesn’t run on Apple computers and Corel hasn’t updated the application in a decade.
- ADOBE FRAMEMAKER (formerly by Frame Technologies) is a powerful application that’s particularly strong for publications that must be produced in several languages. Like Ventura Publisher, Frame (its original name) was never able to attract a large following.
- ADOBE PAGEMAKER (formerly by Aldus) is no longer being updated, but it’s acceptable for small documents. Anything more than a 4-page brochure will tax your patience.
- QUARK XPRESS is the poster child for over-priced, under-powered applications. XPress became the darling of the Mac design crowd because, when it arrived on the scene, the only other choice for Mac users was PageMaker.

- TEX, written by Donald E. Knuth, professor emeritus at Stanford University, and LATEX. Knuth designed TeX to typeset math equations in his books, but it has been expanded, particularly with the LaTeX templating tool, to more general work. Those who have taken the time to learn how it works love it. It is free under terms of the GNU General Public Licence (“Copyleft”) and is available for most computing platforms.
- MICROSOFT PUBLISHER is a surprisingly strong application although its interface is designed for those who know little about typesetting or design.

Which to choose? For nearly 20 years, my recommendation was Ventura Publisher. If you’re still using Ventura, though, now is the time to start thinking about changing. Ventura doesn’t support Unicode characters and, although it’s still a flexible and powerful application, the future belongs to Adobe InDesign. **B**

## Website on the Cheap

I received a question from a reader: *I want to establish a website and was thinking of using a free service because I have little money and no fancy graphics. I think an informational, well-written page on the uses of the product as well as the story behind it will lend some credibility. In one of your articles, you stated that it is probably better to not have a website if it is not going to be a good one. Do you think a simple page or two with the product, graphics, information on the product, uses and a few testimonials along with contact information is a waste? I guess that constitutes a website so I am not sure if it is right thing to do yet.*

Fortunately, it’s possible to have a real website for very little money. Domain registration will be about \$10 per year from GoDaddy.com and, although my preference for Web hosting is a company such as BlueHost.com for about \$100 per year, GoDaddy offers low cost hosting and e-mail for about \$30 per year.

If you pay a bit extra, there are design tools you can use to set up the site. It’s a good option for someone who wants to do all the work personally. Just having a domain name and a real e-mail address is a big plus. Running a business with an AOL or Yahoo or Hotmail address tells the world it’s not a very big company and sends a message that it’s not a serious company.

If you choose GoDaddy for hosting, take care during the checkout process because the company offers lots of extra features that, if selected, push the price well over what Blue Host would charge. If you need the extra features, and it appears that you do not, then Blue Host is the better deal.

Either way, there are now also some good options that allow a person who has the time and inclination to do a bit of homework to install a basic sales section, too, for on-line sales. It won’t have all the features that a site like Amazon will have, but it will be enough to allow you to sell your product from the website.

Good luck! **B**