Demise of videotex technologies predicted

Emerging microcomputer image-processing and transmission technologies will alter videotex services as they exist today, predicted International Resource Development, a Norwalk, Connecticut, market research firm. The current technologies are merely "transitional methods," according to a recent IRD report.

Videotex is an interactive, menu-driven database service. Some videotex services, such as the Source, Dow Jones News/Retrieval, and CompuServe, use ASCII to code their data, making them available nationally to anyone with a personal computer and a modem.

Other services, such as Times Mirror's Gateway in suburban Los Angeles, California, and Knight-Ridder's Viewtron in suburban Miami, Florida, use the Canadian-American-French NAPLPS, an algorithmic color-graphics-and-text coding syntax, to transmit signals to and from special decoders. Some services use the World system, based on Britain's Prestel graphics syntax. They too require special decoders.

All offer on-demand information and some interactive services such as stock quotes, library searching, product ordering, and banking.

The IRD report cited the rise of bit-mapping technologies in PC terminal displays and the leap in PC computing power as powering the projected changes in videotex. In fact, Gateway and Viewtron have switched from marketing or renting decoders to promoting PCs bundled with videotex-translation software in their bid to gain subscribers.

Improved output storage and output devices, along with high-speed processors and increased RAM, will erase the barriers separating videotex and integrated communications networks, the report predicted. And as the screen resolution, color capability, and graphics display timing improve in the hardware, similar improvements in the software drivers will occur, the report said.

Already, several firms—including Philips, Matsushita, and Toshiba—have reported optical disk systems using digital compression techniques to reduce the number of bits required to store a page by a factor of 22, the IRD report said.

The report envisioned users downloading data from an on-line database or videotex service through a communications network into the user's PC for processing by the user's software. In fact, one cable firm recently announced the startup of such a service in Denver, Colorado, and Buffalo, New York, using the cable service as the transmission medium.

Such integration of data across software environments will require seamless PC software to allow data flow from one application to another without user intervention. This would be similar to a company downloading budget data from its mainframe into a PC's Lotus 1-2-3 spreadsheet report.

Software seen as key to computer market growth

The computer industry must turn to software to recapture sales momentum and fuel substantial market growth, said Mark Krupka, marketing director at Digital Learning Systems, an OEM software developer.

The computer industry relies on repeat customers for more than half of its annual sales, although only eight percent of the potential marketplace has been penetrated, he said. New hardware will not attract new customers, he said.

"The person who has not yet purchased a personal computer doesn't understand why he should purchase one," Krupka said. Tutorial-like programs that introduce a PC's capabilities is one approach that stores might use. These programs could also supplement, if not largely replace, printed manuals, most of which, he said, are clumsily and confusingly written. And statistics show that less than 20 percent of the users read more than 40 percent of the manuals, he said.

Krupka said the current approach would be like a television showroom with sets displaying the standard color bars. They don't. What they do is show the sets tuned in to actual programs. "How excited should an uninformed user get over a monitor displaying the 'A' prompt or a spreadsheet?" he asked.

However, the industry must do more than improve the sales pitch. Conceptual programs—those that help people think better and more quickly—must be developed, Krupka said. He cited Framework and Reflex as early examples of such programs.

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