CD-ROM: The Microsoft perspective

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Compact Disc Read Only Memory (CD-ROM) is the ideal medium for distribution of information. CD-ROM features high capacity (550 megabytes), low cost, convenience, durability, and a worldwide standard. Eight different companies manufacture CD-ROM drives.

So far, CD-ROM has been used mainly in vertical applications areas such as medicine, science, finance, and libraries. CD-ROM has provided clear benefits for these applications through reduced cost, improved accessibility of information, and easier updating.

Microsoft Corporation recently announced a general purpose CD-ROM product, Microsoft Bookshelf. Microsoft Bookshelf contains a library of ten of the most useful reference works for anyone writing or editing with a PC. The innovative product includes a dictionary, thesaurus, and a ZIP code directory, as well as, The World Almanac and Book of Facts, the University of Chicago Manual of Style, Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, and more. Microsoft Bookshelf helps the PC user write more accurately, more precisely, and more creatively by making these reference works available from within a word processor at the touch of a keystroke.

Amdek Corporation, best known for its line of PC monitors, has recently announced a CD-ROM drive, the Laserdrive-1, to be sold through retail computer dealers. Amdek will include a copy of Microsoft Bookshelf with its drive.

These developments are enabling the use of CD-ROM in a general purpose PC environment. As a larger base of CD-ROM drives is established, software developers and publishers will be able to enhance their offerings by making them available on CD-ROM without having to justify the purchase of a drive for just one application. Publication of common, low cost information will be a primary use of CD-ROM as will publication of specialized information. The benefits of CD-ROM will enhance existing applications by facilitating production of better tutorials and help systems which include audio, an increased number of examples, style sheets, templates, and product drivers, and by incorporating advances in artificial intelligence research to make possible entirely new classes of applications, such as Microsoft Bookshelf.

Microsoft has also developed MS-DOS CD-ROM Extensions which allow standard IBM PCs and compatibles to read files from CD-ROM discs in a transparent fashion. The Extensions, which are included with many CD-ROM drives, provide the CD-ROM disc interface to allow most existing programs to read CD-ROM files without modification. The MS-DOS CD-ROM Extensions read discs in the “High Sierra” format which has been adopted by most CD-ROM developers.

With CD-ROM moving from very specialized vertical applications to more general purpose uses, the CD-ROM industry is now looking at adding multi-media capabilities to CD-ROM. The concept of interactive compact disc (ICD) marries a CD-ROM player to a computer capable of displaying image-quality graphics, and playing audio. ICD will be an important concept in bringing CD-ROM (and computers!) to the broadest possible base of users, and also in delivering the benefits of CD-ROM to consumers in the home. RCA has recently announced a new technology called DVI (Digital Video Interactive) which could play an important role in ICD systems. Philips has proposed an ICD system called CD-I. There is still a lot of work to be done before ICD systems are introduced to the market.