

Comdex:

The Year 1 PC

THREE YEARS AGO, THERE WAS NO SUCH THING AS A COMDEX.

Two years ago, this national trade exposition for computer dealers was held for the first time. About 180 companies set up exhibits in the Ballroom of the Las Vegas Hilton Hotel, and maybe 4,500 people came to see their wares.

Last year the show expanded into the Las Vegas Convention Center's two smaller halls—a space double that of the Hilton ballroom—to accommodate a doubled number of both exhibitors and aisle-walkers.

And this year (November '81) COMDEX moved into the Convention Center's big East Hall, which dwarfs the other two halls combined. Six hundred forty-four exhibitors mounted displays of their microcomputer wares, and nearly 25,000 people reportedly attended. It was a fitting sign for the year when IBM finally decided to enter the world of the personal computer.

IBM was at COMDEX, with an exhibit booth near the entrance—a glossy thing in chrome and smoked Lucite. But in a curious twist the Personal Computer was not to be seen within. Instead, IBM was showing samples of its more traditional data processing hardware, and the blue-suited minions attending the booth admitted to little knowledge of the Personal Computer. IBM's booth seemed one of the few places in the hall where their Personal Computer was not a subject of major interest.

(Speculation was that IBM chose not to show the PC because COMDEX is a show for dealers, and IBM already had all the interest it wanted from computer dealers.)

Elsewhere on the floor, there was evidence aplenty of the interest IBM's PC had galvanized within the microcomputer business. Clearly, people had wasted no time in rising to the opportunity they sensed IBM was creating.

This magazine was no exception. Six weeks after opening our doors for business, *PC* was there exhibiting at COMDEX, handing out copies of our eight-page "Preview Issue." Meanwhile, our editors and photographer were prowling the floor for products inspired by the PC. To our glee, we found plenty, with promises of greater plenty to come.

20 Add-ons in Two Months

The pleasant shocker for us was right down at the end of our aisle, in the booth of a Cleveland outfit called Tecmar. In about the same time it took us to produce our eight pages, Tecmar had produced a complete line of 20 add-on accessories for the PC. They even had an expansion adapter that could pass for the PC System Unit's twin—until you peeked inside and saw a 5-million character Winchester storage disk where the PC has its diskette drives.

Actual IBM Personal Computers on the exhibit floor were relatively scarce, perhaps because people were still having difficulty getting their hands on them. (Folks kept coming by to look at the PC in our booth and asking if we knew where they could get one quick). Those who didn't have one were talking about them anyway.

The IBM PCs we did see on the floor staked out the whole range of microcomputer goods and services. In addition to Tecmar, there was a printing company, a color monitor company, a local-network developer, a few marketers of business and financial software, and no doubt others we missed amid all the COMDEX hurly-burly. One scout we talked to claimed to have seen twenty-five PCs around the hall.

An Automatic Program Writer

Some products we didn't have to find because they found us. Skip Tamargo, president of a Florida company called FutureSoft, commandeered the computer

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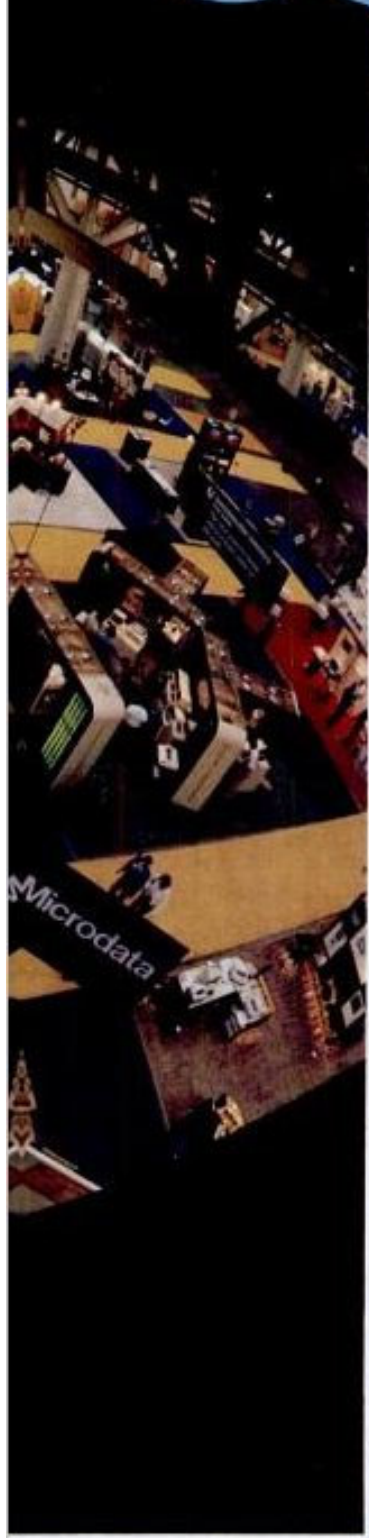


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Comdex scenes: Clowning around with Amdek color monitor (1). MPI... graphics with IBM PC (2). Desnet local network connects PC with... mar expansion cabinet is PC lookalike (5). PC director of marketing... out "preview issues" to play watch-the-birdie-watching-you (6).

in our booth for a do-it-yourself demonstration of his **QUICKPRO** software, which he described as an "automatic program writer." While Tamargo stood by to act as a human user's manual, we sat at our PC's keyboard with **QUICKPRO** and worked out a program to gather data from people making inquiries at our booth. Tamargo's software presented us, after a few preliminaries, with a display screen blank except for letters marking each line.

Using the letters to select lines where we wanted text to appear, we formatted an "input screen" with entries for NAME, ADDRESS and all the other facts we wanted to gather from our booth visitors. Tamargo showed us how to indicate the maximum space we wanted to allow for each of these entries, and what kind of information we wanted to permit in each, such as

"numbers only." When we finished designing the input screen, **QUICKPRO** asked us for other details about the anticipated size of our files and how we wanted to organize them. On completion, the program crunched away for a while, then presented us with a nice little BASIC program to handle our booth-visitor files. The program had facilities to add entries to the file, change or delete previous entries, and go looking for facts that had already been entered.

Finally, Tamargo had us list our new BASIC program to the screen, and showed that it was a standard, ordinary program that could be edited and modified in any of the usual ways. What's more, as a byproduct of the data entry process, the program was liberally salted with remark statements documenting what each pro-

gram section was doing. All in all, not a bad performance. (The program did run afoul of some editorial pet peeves though—in several places it required user typing, thinking or calculating when it seemed the computer ought to have been doing the work. Tamargo's reluctance to take advantage of PC's special features such as the "softkeys" also won no applause).

Peripherals Were Central

Over at the display of Micro Peripherals Inc. they were showing a dot-matrix printer they claimed would run rings around the one IBM sells. Their \$849 printer was pumping out some very nice looking graphics, and the MPI people were

talking about doing some elaborate text printing where the letters would be done using a graphics rather than text approach—allowing italics, simulated script, proportional spacing and other appealing goodies. MPI has promised to lend PC one of these printers for further evaluation, and a report on it will be in a future issue.

Another item we admired at COMDEX has already arrived at the PC offices for a closer look—a Color II video monitor from Amdek. This monitor is of the “RGB direct drive” type and produces spectacularly crisp, clear and stable images. The improvement over the “baseband” type display we had been using before is dramatic; text at the 80-column width is quite distinct and readable. It caught our eye at Amdek’s booth not only because of the great picture, but also because the cabinet design and color fit so harmoniously with the PC. We’ll have more on this and other color monitors in an upcoming issue too.

Awards for both a great idea and great graphics are due to a Silicon Valley company by the name of Destek, which was promoting its Desnet “local network” for interconnection of microcomputers. Desnet was being touted as “the key to computer city” and the accompanying artwork was uncommonly handsome for the computer world. The network arrangement, which connects into the PC and other microcomputers using a \$100 plug-in card, will supposedly string together several different brands and models of computer into a system working as a unified whole. There was a demonstration that showed this on at least a superficial level, but it will take a more thorough look before we can figure out how much compatibility Desnet really creates.

M.B.A.s for Sale

In the software department, one trend we noted favorably was the appearance of integrated groups of programs that serve multiple purposes. The groundbreaker in this area is a suite of programs being sold under the name *MBA* by Context Management Systems of Torrance, California.

MBA was still in the working stages for an anticipated spring release, but we got a preview look at its combination of an electronic spreadsheet, data base manager, graphics displaymaker, word processor and communications handler. The idea, as Context’s Gib Hoxie explained it, is that managers can go into a data base to draw out a selected set of facts, then “change contexts” to move those facts into the spreadsheet program. There they can manipulate them in typical “what-if”

spreadsheet fashion, then change contexts again to display the results in graphic form. In theory, they might then switch contexts again to frame a memo around the digested data using the word processor... and ultimately use the communications handler to send the whole thing off to a colleague at another location.

At COMDEX, many of these ambitious offerings were on display only as an enthusiastic gleam in Hoxie’s eyes. But we did see a demonstration showing good progress on the general theory—even including the ability to split the screen into multiple segments and show operations from four different “contexts” simultaneously. Context appears to have made a heavy investment in promoting their concept, and if a similar investment underlies their final development effort we shall have a finished Context product to tell you about before long.

More executive software for the PC was on display at the booth of Target Software, an Atlanta company recently acquired by Comshare, who makes software for big computers. Target’s big gun is called *MasterPlanner*, and is described as an evolutionary upgrade of earlier spreadsheet programs. PC was treated to an enlightening explanation by Target’s Bob Ranson about the different design philosophies for such programs. Ranson described three categories he says the “gridsheet” programs can fall into—“cursor driven (*VisiCalc*), logic driver (*T-Maker*), and procedure driven (*Desktop Plan*)”—and showed how *Masterplanner* incorporates strong points of all. His comments will be expanded upon in our next issue, when we do a comparative evaluation of spreadsheet programs.

Challengers Begin to Gather

A last item of interest at COMDEX was the appearance of other microcomputers

aimed at or near the PC’s territory and with similar capabilities. Victor Business Systems introduced a desktop system built around the same 8088 chip as the PC. It is said to be capable of using software designed for the PC, though it can’t read PC diskettes since the drives are incompatible. Its disk storage capacity is double that of IBM’s machine, and the Victor also has an optional display format capable of showing much more information—132 columns by 40 rows.

A microcomputer introduced by Fortune Systems, a new company, had slick office styling of the same type as the PC’s, and was designed around the allegedly more powerful 68000 processor chip. This machine garnered a great deal of attention from the crowds on the floor, and more will likely be heard about it. PC also took interested note of the Otrona Attache microcomputer, which we had plenty of time to view since their booth was right across from ours. The Attache, a portable microcomputer selling for about \$3,700, packs a lot of power and appeal into an impressively small package. It seemed to us that people who admire the IBM approach to personal computers would find much to admire in this one if they absolutely had to have a portable.

As for all of the COMDEX exhibitors who had nothing to display for the IBM PC, it seemed like more than half of those we asked claimed they were in the process of getting something together.

With a year for them all to work on it, and judging by how much has happened in the first couple of months, COMDEX’s second year of the PC Era promises to be full of worthwhile things to write about. And PC, naturally, will be there to write about it.

It’s going to be exciting. In fact, it already is.

—Jim Edlin and David Bunnell

TecMates

Tecmar unveils a plug-in smorgasbord

THERE IS A SAYING THAT DEFINES *LUCK* as “the intersection of opportunity with preparedness.” If that is so, then Tecmar, Inc., in Cleveland, is a very lucky company. Because when IBM presented them with an opportunity, in the form of the Personal Computer, Tecmar met it with seemingly faultless preparedness. The

result, a mere three months after IBM’s official announcement of the PC, was Tecmar’s COMDEX announcement of 20 add-ons, expansions accessories and enhancements for it.

The company’s ads could almost be headed, “Everything you always wanted

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