July, 1996

Editor's View

A Move to the 'Net

Microsoft support has left CompuServe. What effect will this have on you?

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

A few months back, Microsoft, which had to that point viewed all the Internet hoo-hah pretty much as a fad, started to take it seriously. They noticed that other companies were taking a lead and setting the standard. Microsoft decided it wanted to become a leader in Internet technology and refocused its strategies. The Internet is now a part of everything going on at Microsoft.

In this vein, Microsoft no longer sponsors any CompuServe forums. In their place, they're opening a number of Network News Transfer Protocol (NNTP, for short) based news groups on the Internet.

It's important to note that this change is not aimed at any one product or product line. It affects every Microsoft product and service.

What does this mean?

This column is being written before the transition occurs. At this writing, it appears that the existing forums will continue to operate under third-party sponsorship. Since Microsoft has not been an active part of the technical support on the forums for some time, most users probably won't notice the difference.

As for the new newsgroups, they'll run much like the CompuServe forums have. Microsoft will be there in the background, but will not be an active part of the technical support picture. Peer-to-peer support remains the primary avenue on-line.

Given Microsoft's new focus on the Internet, this move is not a surprise. The only surprise is the speed at which it occurred. The announcement was scheduled for a mere 12 days before Microsoft's pullout. The newsgroups were to open only 10 days before the pullout. This isn't much of a transition period for people to find the newsgroups and learn how to use them.

For Internet users with no CompuServe access, this is a big win. If the newsgroups can provide the level of support the CompuServe forums already have, then it'll be a big win for the entire community. That remains to be seen.

For CompuServe users, there's probably no loss as long as the forums remain open with the same names. If the existing forums should close, though, users as well as providers of third-party products stand to lose a valuable support medium.

We'll keep an eye on what happens both on CompuServe and the new newsgroups and let you know how it shakes out.

Wouldn't It Be Nice?

I recently spent nearly two months in laptop limbo. For an assortment of reasons, I decided it was time for a new notebook. I figured out what machine I wanted (after a trip to the store to try out the various pointing devices) and ordered it. From that point on, everything seemed to go wrong. It took me more than a month to realize that there really was a systemic hardware problem with the machine I'd received, followed by several frantic days on the phone trying to find a replacement machine.

Just at the end of all this, I finally decided to take the plunge and upgrade all my machines to Windows NT. This led to several days of installing and configuring and bothering more knowledgeable friends on the phone and generally feeling aggravated about the whole thing. On my desktop machine, it turned out that NT can only see my CD-ROM drive if I boot to DOS first, then reboot to NT - it took several weeks of fiddling and tech support calls to figure that one out.

What all this really reminded me was how much I hate dealing with hardware. I want to buy a computer, install my software, and never have to think about what's inside again. I'm a software developer and user and I don't want to know about IRQs and DMAs and other TLAs (three-letter acronyms). Plug-and-Play sounds like it was made for me. I'll be watching carefully over the next months and years to see if it really works.

Configuring two machines also made me realize how much things have changed in a very short time. The last time I bought a new PC for myself (about two and a half years ago), every single piece of software was installed from floppy disks. Since that machine was a notebook with only a 3 1/2" disk drive, I had to copy some 5 1/4" floppies onto 3 1/2". This time around, more than half of what I installed (including Windows NT itself) came off a CD-ROM. I can't imagine buying a computer without a CD-ROM drive today. Nor can I imagine buying one with a 5 1/4" drive. The rate of change in our industry is both frightening and exhilarating.

Oh, and the new notebook is wonderful. Ask me for a peek if I see you at a conference or user group meeting.

Save Time for DevCon

I've set aside October 27-30 to be in Arizona for the 7th FoxPro DevCon. It'll be held at the Princess in Scottsdale (a suburb of Phoenix). Based on what Microsoft is saying and the last DevCon, it's a safe bet that you'll get to hear what's new in Visual FoxPro 4.0 there. Hope to see you.