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Editor's View

But is it really helpful?

What good is help if you can't get to it?

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

So I decided to change Web browsers—the one I was using couldn't do some things I needed to do. I downloaded the leading browser (all 3 megabytes of it!) and installed it. So far, so good. It started right up and the interface seemed pretty similar to what I'd been using. But, no matter what I did, it wouldn't see my connection to the 'Net.

Okay, no big deal. I'll just look in Help and see if there's any advice. Guess what - everything on the Help menu is a pointer to a Web page. What kind of help is that? If I can't get *to* the Web, what is help *on* the Web going to do for me? Where's the help for when you can't get to the Web?

I've seen similar examples of stupidity in other products. The people who design them seem to forget that things go wrong and that users don't always know how to do everything in the first place.

With this in the background, I picked up Alan Cooper's book "About Face - The Essentials of User Interface Design." I can safely say I will never look at a user interface the same way again. This book should be required reading for every application designer, programmer, interface designer and anyone else who has any say over what applications look like. Best of all, it's an easy read - I read most of it on a family vacation. (My preferred poolside reading is murder mysteries and romances, so that's saying a lot.)

There's far too much wisdom in *About Face* to summarize here, but as my writing partner, Ted Roche, put it, "It's the best book I've read this year—my own included." If you haven't encountered this gem yet, run, do not walk, to your nearest bookstore and get a copy.

How are the Newsgroups doing?

When Microsoft switched their official forums from CompuServe to Internet newsgroups (see the July '96 Editor's View), I promised to let you know periodically how the new newsgroups are shaping up.

As I write this, it's been about three months. So far, despite some adjustment issues with the new forum management (Stream Intl.), it's clear that the CompuServe forums (FoxForum, FoxUser, VFox) continue to offer the best on-line support for FoxPro. The newsgroups (msnews.microsoft.com) suffer from several problems. Most of them have to do with the inherent structure of newsgroups.

CompuServe forums are highly structured—each is divided into sections, and each section into threads. Every CompuServe message is addressed to someone (though it might be "sysop" or "all").

In the newsgroups, each group has only a single section, so you need to either check into lots of little groups or you get message threads about many topics combined into a single newsgroup. Microsoft has mixed the two approaches - there are five groups dedicated to FoxPro, but by far the largest is the one called "Programmer's Exchange."

Another big problem with newsgroups is that all messages are posted to the group, not to individuals. So, if someone responds to a message you wrote, there's no way to retrieve that response without checking out the whole group. For those of us accustomed to offline readers that let us collect and respond to messages addressed to us many times a day, this is a big step backwards.

Hardware presents another problem. Although it's better than it was at first, I'm still hearing lots of reports of the Microsoft newsgroup server being slow and overloaded.

Finally, since Microsoft views the newsgroups as peer-to-peer support (as they did with CompuServe in the last few years), the quality of support depends very much on who checks in to answer questions. At this point, far more of the most knowledgeable FoxPro experts continue to help on CompuServe than visit the newsgroups regularly.

With the recent announcement by CompuServe that it's moving toward an Internet-based structure, it's clear that many of the newsgroup's problems will have to be solved. CompuServe members won't stand for the lack of structure in the newsgroups. Within a couple of years, I imagine Internet newsgroups will be far more usable than they are now. In the meantime, I'll keep you posted on how it's going.

Last Chance for DevCon

DevCon is rapidly approaching. This is your opportunity for in-person learning from the world's best FoxPro developers as well as many of the people who built the product.

This year's conference, scheduled for October 27-30 in Scottsdale, Arizona, (just outside Phoenix) will unveil Visual FoxPro 5.0. If you saw last month's FoxPro Advisor, you already know that VFP5 offers significant productivity enhancements as well as enhanced OLE and Internet capabilities. The new version is truly a pleasure to work with. DevCon offers the opportunity for a running start.

DevCon is also the opportunity to meet with other people who do what you do. The connections you make there are sure to make your job easier or maybe even help you find a new job. If you're active in the FoxPro cyber-world, DevCon gives you the chance to attach faces to familiar names. If you're not meeting your colleagues electronically, meeting them face-to-face at DevCon may give you the incentive to do so, or you might meet others from your local area and decide to start or revitalize a FoxPro user group. The benefits of attending a FoxPro conference are so diverse that it's hard to enumerate them all.

If you haven't considered coming to Scottsdale, give it one more thought before it's too late. I hope to meet many of you there.