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Editor's View

Keeping up with the Joneses

While we might be happy to buy new computers every couple of years, most of the people we write programs for won't be.

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

My husband and I drive our cars into the ground. We view cars as transportation and don't feel a need to drive the fanciest, newest, most exciting thing around.

These days, I drive a three-year-old minivan. When we were shopping for it, I really wanted something with eight seat belts and sliding doors on both sides. But no such van was available then. A year later, Chrysler updated their Voyager/Caravan and included both of those features. But I didn't trade in my otherwise satisfactory new car just to have the latest gizmos, even gizmos I wanted. In fact, I still expect to drive my van at least three more years, probably longer.

So I'm not surprised when a client tells me he doesn't want to replace his three-year-old computers just so they can run the latest software. After all, to him, a three-year-old computer isn't old anymore than my van is old to me.

While buying a new computer is a treat for me, my clients don't see it that way. They expect to buy computers the way they buy copiers or telephones or fax machines (and I buy cars). Buy it, use it until it dies, then replace it.

Many of the new applications and upgrades the software manufacturers are releasing these days are for 32-bit Windows only. Even those that still run in 16 bits have tremendous resource requirements. If these applications run on those three-year-old computers, they don't run well.

I remember an old Mad magazine article that was about things you could do to people you hated. One of them was to give the person's daughter a Barbie doll. The clothing and accessories would cost your enemy a small fortune.

The computer industry seems to run on the same principle these days. As hardware improves, software is written to take advantage of it. Invariably, the software needs more than the hardware offers, so hardware improves again, starting the cycle all over. Economically, this is what both the software and hardware manufacturers need.

But the availability of new hardware doesn't change what's sitting on our clients' desks (and some of those clients have thousands of desks). Upgrading one or two stations isn't that big a deal for most businesses, but upgrading a hundred or a thousand or ten thousand is a different story.

What's the solution? I've already started practicing one piece of an answer. When asked to specify hardware, I always tell people to buy the most powerful, most loaded machine they can afford, even if it seems like overkill. It won't a year from now.

When I buy a machine for myself, I generally go one step below the best available. The top is too pricey, but stepping back one level tends to be much cheaper and gives me enough that the machine won't be obsolete too quickly.

In discussing this issue, someone suggested to me that, in the next few years, upgrading components of a computer will become a lot more common. This makes sense to me, since it allows users to get more life out of existing machines, but still gives the hardware manufacturers something to sell.

In the meantime, we all need to be aware of the situation. We're in this business so we get excited about the latest hardware and software, but our users are in some other business and just want reliable tools.

So You Do Read This Column

If I ever had any doubts about whether people read this column, the last few months would have convinced me that you do. I've had a lot of feedback on several recent Editor's View columns.

In May, I wrote about the pace of change in the software industry and ended with a plea for the manufacturers to slow down. In June, I discussed what I think of as "rude software"—applications that forget whose computer they're running on and do things their way rather than yours. Both of these columns brought me a bundle of e-mail as a number of you let me know that you agree with my point of view.

The June column included examples of the kind of rudeness I was talking about. Many of the examples came from Microsoft products, not because Microsoft is worse in this area than others, but because I work with several Microsoft products day in and day out, so know their foibles better than other products.

Among my messages was one from Visual FoxPro Product Manager David Lazar. While he agreed with me on some of the points I made (in particular, about the addition of New Office Document and Open Office Document to the start menu), he also wanted to provide more information about some of the issues I raised.

I wrote about difficulties I had in installing Office 97 while leaving parts of Office 95 installed. David assures me that it can be done in a couple of ways. Apparently, I failed to notice the appropriate prompts along the way. (The fact that a knowledgeable user like me could miss them is, of course, a user interface issue, too, but that's a point for a different column.)

David acknowledged the problems I mentioned with the conversion of Word 97 documents to Word 95 format and mentioned that it would be fixed. It has, in fact. The updated converter is now available at www.microsoft.com/word/freestuff/converters/wrd97cnv.htm.

Perhaps the most feedback I've had recently has come from my August column where I mentioned that we'd like to hear about FoxPro success stories. So many of you responded that not only will we be running some articles in FoxPro Advisor, but we're added a section to our website to share them, too. The details aren't available yet, but by the time you read this, you should be able to find a collection of overviews of

successful VFP applications at advisor.com, along with instructions for submitting your own applications.