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Advisor Answers

FoxPro 2.x and Visual FoxPro

Q: In the Menu Builder, I place "\<" next to the letter I want the user to be able to press (with the ALT key) to access that bar without the mouse. The underscore appears on the menu, but the ALT-key doesn't do anything (usually). Sometimes it allows access to the first bar, but none others. Am I missing something obvious here?

–Dean Karlan (via CompuServe)

A: This is one of those things that drives folks nuts. There are two different ways to quickly access a menu item from the keyboard. Before we look at them, a quick review of menu terminology. The type of menus built by the Menu Builder (or Menu Designer, as it's now known in Visual FoxPro) has four kinds of components. The top level is the *menu bar*, the narrow strip that runs across the top of your screen. The menu bar contains *pads*. For example, the standard pads in Windows applications are File, Edit, Window and Help. Each pad in turn is associated with a *popup*. When you click on the pad or navigate to it and press Enter (or up or down arrow), the popup opens. The popup is built of *bars*, the actual items that appear on the menu, like New and Open on the File menu. I'll refer to pads and bars, the two components that have prompts, jointly as *menu items*.

Back to menu access. One way of quickly choosing a pad or bar is called a hot key - that's the underlined (or highlighted, in FoxPro/DOS) letter in a menu item. Hot keys are available only when the menu is active. In fact, the hot key for a particular item is available only when the appropriate part of the menu has focus. For example, when a menu popup is open, the hot keys for the items in that popup are available, but the hot keys for other menu pads are not. You set up hot keys by including the "\<" characters in the menu prompt.

The other quick access is called a menu shortcut - that's a key combination you can press at any time to choose a particular menu item. For example, FoxPro's CTRL-F2 to bring up the Command Window and Window's CTRL-X for cut are menu shortcuts. Menu shortcuts are available only when the menu *doesn't* have focus or when the popup containing the right item is open.

You specify menu shortcuts separately from hot keys. In the Menu Builder, choose the Options buttons for the menu item you want to have a shortcut. The Prompt Options dialog appears. Choose Shortcut. In the Key Definition dialog, first press the key combination for the shortcut. Then, Tab to the other text box (labeled Key Text:) and type the reminder you want to appear on the menu item. For menu pads, it doesn't matter what you specify for Key Text - it's ignored. But for menu bars, the text you specify appears at the right hand side of the popup, helping the user to learn the menu shortcuts. (Figures 1 shows the Prompt Options and Key Definition dialogs when we're creating a standard menu pad. Figure 2 has the same dialogs for a standard bar.)
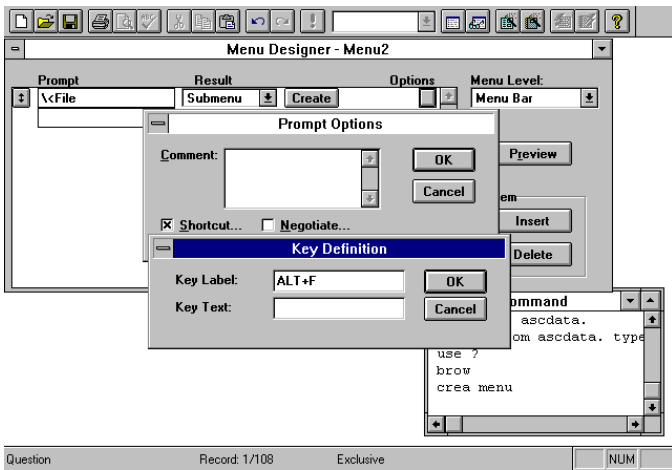
Figure 1. Pad Shortcuts. ALT+F is the usual shortcut for the File pad. Don't bother to specify key text. It's ignored for pads.
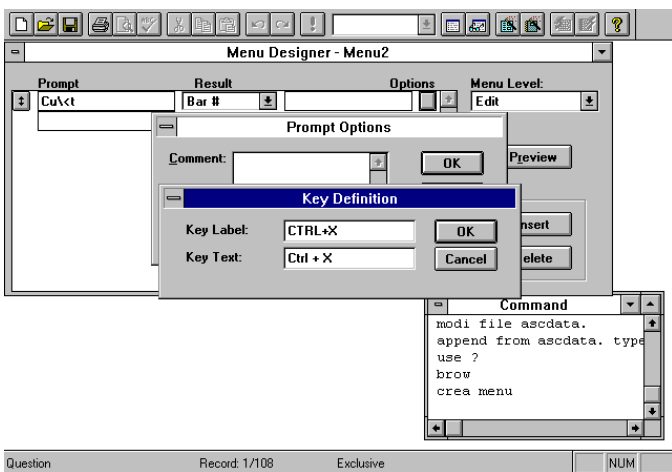

Figure 2. Bar Shortcuts. Edit-Cut usually has a shortcut of CTRL+X. By specifying key text, you help users to learn the shortcuts.

It's customary (especially in Windows) to use Alt-key combinations for pads and Ctrl-key combinations or function keys for bars. For pads, you'll always want the shortcut to be an Alt-key version of the hot key. For bars, sometimes you have Ctrl-the hot key, but other times, another combination makes more sense.

Note also that hot keys can be repeated on different menu popups while shortcuts must not. Since hot keys work only when the popup is open, it doesn't matter if items on different popups have the same hot key. But shortcuts are available when the menu doesn't have focus. This means that only one item can be chosen by any given shortcut.

–Tamar