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Editor's View

Say It Again, Sam?

Plus CompuServe support has changed.

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

I used to subscribe to Parents magazine. When my children were little, it was a valuable source of information on a myriad of issues, from sleep and feeding habits to education to socialization.

After I'd been getting it for several years, though, I noticed that some articles seemed familiar, as if I'd read them before. I hadn't, of course, but what I noticed was that certain topics (like children's speech development or making friends) would be covered every few years. Of course, each time, there was some new information that researchers had uncovered in the interim, but mostly, the article would cover the same ground as the previous one.

When I thought about it, that strategy made sense for Parents. After all, each child is only at a particular stage for a short time, and most parents only read the articles that relate to their children's current stage and those coming up soon. Most people aren't as obsessive as I am about reading just about everything in a magazine.

This all came to mind recently when I received a question for the Ask Advisor column about allowing READ windows to scroll or setting up a multi-page READ. This was one of the first questions I answered when Steve Freides and I started writing a column then titled "FoxPro Solutions" in the brand-new FoxPro Advisor magazine. The answer hasn't changed since then. (It's in the May 1993 issue.)

Perhaps this questioner is new to FoxPro or maybe he's just new to FoxPro Advisor. The issue for me as Editor is how to serve readers like him without doing a disservice to our old readers who already have a shelf full of magazines.

Fortunately, thanks to advances in technology and the wizardry of our Technical department, there's a good answer. Not only are individual back issues available, but you can get the entire first two years of FoxPro Advisor on The Complete FoxPro Advisor 93-94 CD-ROM. (See the ad in this issue for details.) There will be a CD-ROM containing all the 1995 issues, too.

Because back issues are so readily available, we can make a different choice than Parents. Rather than run an article that is essentially the same as a previous article, we can instead focus on new and different techniques.

If someone's found a new way to do the same old thing, we'll tell you about it. For example, Steve Black added a new twist to screen sets with his Tabs driver for GENSCRNX (covered in the Oct '94 issue).

If somebody can explain something with a new slant so that it makes more sense, we'll give you that, too. But we'll do our best not to print articles that make you feel like you've read them before.

If you're new to FoxPro or FoxPro Advisor and you plan to work in FoxPro 2.x for a while, I strongly recommend you get the '93-'94 CD. The techniques and solutions in those issues are still just as relevant today as when they were printed.

Finally, this doesn't mean we'll stop covering FoxPro 2.x. As long as people have something new to say and we believe that lots of you are interested, we'll keep covering it.

CompuServe Support Changes

There are two changes in CompuServe support for FoxPro you need to know about. The first is very positive. Rather than try to add Visual FoxPro to the existing support forum (FoxForum), which already is extremely active, Microsoft has opened a new forum, VFox, for Visual FoxPro support. It has 22 sections focused on various aspects of the Visual FoxPro environment. (Not surprisingly, the "Mac installation and configuration" section hasn't been too busy so far.) VFox has quickly become a very busy place - I hope to see many of you there. FoxUser (also known as FoxGang) remains the place to post job notices, discuss books and magazines, hash out philosophical issues, talk to third-party vendors, and just hang out.

The other change I'm less enthusiastic about. Microsoft is changing the nature of support on all of its CompuServe Developer forums. Their goal is to reduce Microsoft personnel to handling administrative tasks (like putting messages where they belong and dealing with people who get out of line) and remove their employees from actually providing active technical support there. The goal is that Developer forums, including FoxForum and Vfox, provide what they like to call "peer-to-peer" support.

This is really the culmination of a process that began when Microsoft bought Fox Software. Even in the old days, most of the support on FoxForum was peer-to-peer. Both Fox and Microsoft have done more filling in the gaps than being the primary support providers. This change, though, means that Microsoft won't fill the gaps.

So who will? There's a two-fold answer to that one. First, Microsoft is hiring some third-party support providers. Forums for other developer products (Visual Basic, Visual C++) have been seeing replies from a company called NetQuest for some time. Watch for them to start appearing on the Fox forums.

The second answer is more in line with the nature of the FoxPro community. Microsoft has taken the existing MVP (Most Valuable Professional) award and converted it to a program. Forum members who provide accurate advice over a period of time will be invited to join the program. There are a number of perks for MVPs, including free flags on the Fox forums, access to Microsoft support personnel who can help in solving really thorny problems and access to materials that aid in providing support (like the Developer Network).

The folks who received the MVP award over its first two years form the initial group for the new program. By now, you've probably already noticed some of the new MVPs recommended by the old ones.

The MVPs are a tremendous group. (Several of our writers are among them, including Ted Roche, Nancy Jacobsen and me.) Most of them have been providing high-quality technical support for years, long before Microsoft offered formal recognition for it. Often, in fact, the MVPs know more about FoxPro than the Microsoft personnel who've been assigned to FoxForum. So, I have no concerns about the quality of support this group can provide.

Nonetheless, I think Microsoft is making a mistake. Their argument is that they can't provide on-line for free what they charge big bucks for on the phone. I disagree—the value of getting users on-line and tied into the existing community far outweighs the costs of staffing. Without a visible Microsoft presence, the Fox forums (and the other developer forums) lose part of their air of authenticity. Some people won't take them seriously.

Life will go on. FoxForum and VFox will remain the best places to get high-quality support for FoxPro and Visual FoxPro. But part of the luster is gone. I hope Microsoft reconsiders.