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## The COMDEX/Fall '99 Show

*Step right up and see all the new technology*

by Péter Jacsó

The COMDEX conference has always been a playground for computer geeks. Often attendees are entertained (or annoyed) by showgirls luring them to booths and by other hired hands dressed as clowns or acrobats who pitch products. Some of these players even stage skits about payroll-management software or the latest fax/copier/water cooler combo. The COMDEX conference in Las Vegas has always been like a P. T. Barnum circus, complete with the freak shows of products that almost everyone but the investors know will not fly. There also have been many cool and awe-inspiring products that did not have price tags, but we knew they were not for the average Acme employee, let alone the average SOHO president/secretary/gofer/janitor.

The circus was still there at the COMDEX/Fall '99 conference, held November 15-19 in Las Vegas, but this time the products themselves were very much part of the show, which sported candy colored and streamlined PCs (inspired by the success of the Apple iMac), peripherals, and every kind of computer gadget conceivable. An unusually large proportion of them belonged to the "I-must-have-it" type instead of the "that's-cool" type.

But the central debate happening in the auditorium and on the floor was PCs vs. information appliances.

### In the Auditorium

Bill Gates, who outsmarted all his bigwig foes 2 years ago with his last-minute arrangement of a Sunday evening keynote

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The Online Information 99 Conference and Exhibition, held recently in London and attended by more than 18,000 visitors, is the largest information industry conference in the world. Richard Poynder, a journalist and 10-year veteran of the show, offers his opinions on both the conference and the current state of the information industry in his article below.

## Bell & Howell Will Restructure to Create Two Separate Companies

NewsBreak by Paula J. Hane

Bell & Howell Co. (B&H) has announced that it plans a major restructuring that will split the company into two new companies, one of which will retain the Bell & Howell name and stock-ticker symbol

(BHW on the NYSE) and consist of the Mail and Messaging Technologies and Imaging businesses. It will focus on a variety of business services and offer applications software. The other business, yet to be named, will comprise the Information Access business units, which are Bell & Howell Information and Learning (formerly UMI) and the Publishing Services business (formerly Publication Systems). This new company will also include Bell & Howell's equity stake in the K-12 Internet business venture with Infonautics, which is still unnamed. Bell & Howell expects to complete the restructuring before the end of the year.

In announcing the plans, James P. Roemer, Bell & Howell chairman, president, and CEO, said: "We're extremely excited about these very positive steps for Bell & Howell. We strongly believe that restructuring ourselves into two highly focused entities will enable our businesses to maximize their fundamental strengths through better access to capital and the ability to attract and retain talented employees." In a Reuters story, Roemer said the company had toyed with the idea of splitting its operations for years, but wanted to solidly establish both branches first.

### The New B&H

Nils Johansson, current executive vice president and CFO of B&H, will serve as

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## Viewpoint

### Things Fall Apart

*How will the industry fare in the new millennium?*

by Richard Poynder

Held December 7-9 in London, the Online Information 99 Conference and Exhibition brought the usual flurry of new product launches, including the release of QWEB from Questel•Orbit and a new Web search engine from Dialog called WebTop.com. It also saw the inevitable surprise acquisition—in this case the announcement that RoweCom had agreed to buy NewsEdge for \$227 million.

But did this annual international exhibition and conference give any clue as to how the industry might fare in the new millennium? Walking around the event for my 10th year I found plenty of questions, but few comfortable answers.

First, while the show attracted an impressive 18,000 visitors, attendance at the event appears to have peaked in recent years (17,728 in 1997, 17,000 last year). With the Internet continuing to grow at an exponential rate, could this indicate that the industry is struggling to attract new users at the very point when the online medium is becoming as ubiquitous as the television?

Second, seeing a subscription agent (RoweCom) buy a real-time news provider (NewsEdge) when news information is becoming a commodity had me wondering if the industry is losing its way. Clearly, consolidation is inevitable in an industry under pressure, but the logic of consolidation is that

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## In This Issue

- Longing for a reliable, honest, and user-friendly information service? **Barbara Quint describes how to design and fund the "perfect portal."** Page 7
- For those contemplating a change, our new **Hiring Line column offers some practical advice, useful resources, and coverage of employment trends** for job seekers and employers in this changing industry. Page 18
- **Paula J. Hane reports on the recent merger of ingenta, the U.K.-based search-and-delivery service, with UnCover, the popular document-delivery service.** Page 46



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## The COMDEX/Fall '99 Show (continued from page 1)

before the official conference opening (and ahead of all the other CEOs), has made that time slot a tradition. Although I could not attend his keynote (and none of the others either), it is available—along with all the other keynotes—in acceptable video quality on <http://www.zdnet.com/pcweek/webcast/comdex/cxfall99.html>. His speech set the tone realistically, emphasizing that the PC will get stronger, but information appliances will get their share too in the information access and delivery landscape of the next century.

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Scott McNealy, CEO of Sun Microsystems, who would never miss the opportunity for Microsoft-bashing and was especially upbeat about the preliminary ruling in the monopolistic charges against Microsoft, invoked the P. T. Barnum image with good humor by having two magicians turn a Windows 98 box into a Monopoly game box. Much more importantly, the Sun Microsystems staff distributed another box that could hurt Microsoft much more seriously than McNealy's mudslinging. I'll discuss that later.

A new keynoter this year, Bob Young, chairman of Red Hat (of Linux commercial distribution and development fame), predicted the death of the PC, I think a little prematurely. Linuxers got a big boost from the low-key keynote of Linus Torvald, the developer of Linux. It seems that he believes the same thing I've been thinking: There will be many who will make big money on his free operating system in one way or another. There was a separate Linux Expo within COMDEX, and in spite of the cute penguin logo and the highfalutin talks about open source and free access, it walked and quacked just like any other profit-making operation.

Carly Fiorina, newcomer not only to the COMDEX keynote pulpit but also to the president's chair at Hewlett-Packard, emphasized Internet-based services wrapped around products that will have a micro-processor with an IP address. That was a somewhat surprising idea coming from that company, as HP is very much in the

traditional PC manufacturing business. Then again, HP is now also in the appliance business, with its appealing but pretty expensive (\$400) PhotoSmart P1000 printer, which prints directly from your digital camera, i.e., without a PC.

Nobuyuki Idei, president of Sony, remained noncommittal on the subject of further developments of the Sony PC line (which was quite a fiasco at the start, but is now getting some recognition), as well as on the subject of the launch of the Sony PlayStation 2. The PlayStation 2 is going to be a mixture of a gaming device and an information appliance. Then he wielded a Memory Stick and had rock guitarist Steve Vai record a guitar solo on it to prove its quality. As I'll discuss in an upcoming CD/DVD Commentaries column, Sony may be a little late in the digital music recording field, in spite of its incredible success with the Walkman.

Notwithstanding the embarrassing moment when a network demo failed during his presentation, John Chambers, CEO of Cisco, was probably in the most comfortable position in the debate. This is because if either the PC or the information appliances side wins, he and his company will win in a big way, as no one can argue that networking hardware and software, Cisco's territory, will become the key component of everything.

### On the Floor

Even a quick look around the exhibit hall made it clear that if not the PC itself, then the beige PC and bulky monitor will disappear shortly. We saw the thin flat panel monitors a year ago, but there were many more this year and at much better prices. Thin is definitely in. More importantly, many of the thin but not Twiggy-thin monitors hid the components that are usually tucked in those clunky beige boxes, which look about as charming as Russian home appliances. As usual, Taiwanese companies are in the forefront of these “computer in a stylish monitor” appliances. CassiusPC (see Figure 1) is a case in point, with its 15-inch LCD panel (equivalent to the viewable area of a 17-inch monitor), which houses a 450-MHz processor, 64 MB of RAM, and a 6.4-GB hard drive. The cordless keyboard and

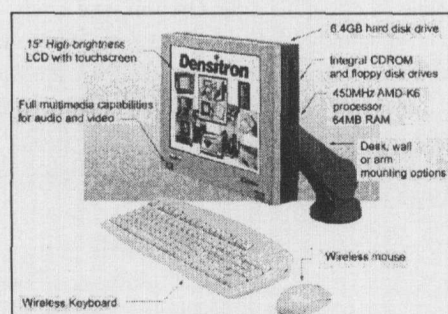


Figure 1

mouse are the only peripherals outside of the monitor. NEC has a similarly configured slim monitor with a PC inside for the business user (Powermate 2000). Its sibling for the home user, the NEC Z1, has similar features but comes in an unattractive color, which makes the otherwise appealingly convenient and reasonably priced (\$800) all-in-one PCs, the eOne from eMachines, Inc. (which did not ex-

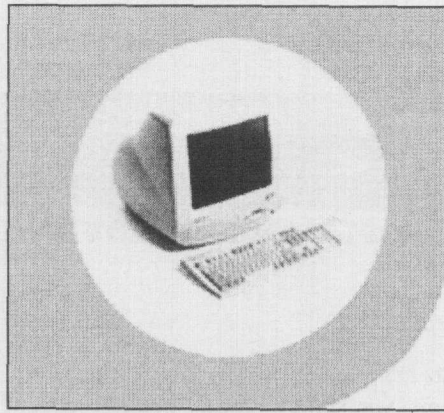


Figure 2

hibit at COMDEX) and Gateway's Astro (Figure 2), even more attractive.

The traditional base unit box with monitor has also gone through a transformation. AMD's Easy Now design is not to my liking, with its excessive amount of purple and its flamboyant styling, but I would like to see the Compaq iPaq with its nice industrial design on my desk. I would also welcome one of Dell's three WebPC models, preferably the high-end one (Figure 3) that has the most logical name and coolest look. It comes in four colors (purple, red, orange, or teal).

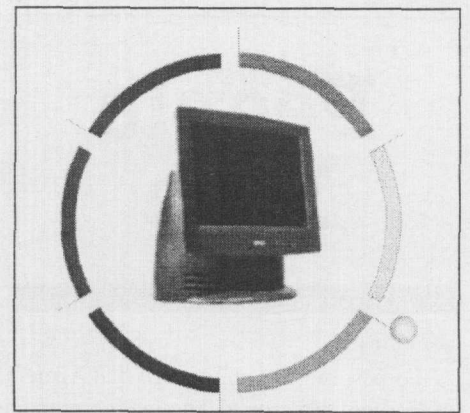


Figure 3

Young Turks (Linux and BeOs). I don't envision a sea change or users abandoning their Windows platforms any time soon. I even bet that customers will again make a beeline for stores to queue up for Windows 2000 the night before it goes on sale.

As for Microsoft's Office suite dominance, that is another question. Scott McNealy may do much more harm to Microsoft with Sun Microsystems' freely distributed StarOffice suite (bought from a German developer), which promises functional equivalence and compatibility with Microsoft's

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Much less visible is the other trend in PCs. It is called legacy-free PC, and it is high-tech talk for a simple concept: to eliminate the ISA/PCI boards used to connect peripheral devices to the motherboard, and to replace them with USB ports. The problem with the neophyte enthusiasm with legacy-free computers is excessiveness. While it is very nice to have five USB ports on your new PC, it is less nice to have not even a single traditional parallel port for your printer, Zip drive, and scanner that you bought recently and would really like to connect to your new PC. Even if you're buying new devices to go with your new, futuristic state of mind for the year 2000, the same peripheral device with a USB port may cost 20 to 25 percent more than its sibling having a parallel port connection.

Of course, there were gadgets exhibited that convert your parallel port to a USB port, but these add to the expense and also to the clutter that many of the above-mentioned devices are meant to reduce.

The big question in the systems software arena was whether Microsoft's operating system hegemony will continue. Beyond the ongoing trial brought by the Department of Justice, Microsoft also has to pay attention to the

Office suite programs. It can be downloaded free or ordered on CD-ROM for a \$10 shipping and handling charge. (Attendees at COMDEX could get it for free.) I haven't tested it yet, but it seems like a real killer app, and it runs on many platforms beyond the Windows family: UNIX, OS/2, Solaris, and Linux. That could be a real threat for Microsoft, even if users don't abandon both Windows and MS Office 2000.

Portable gadgets and appliances were all around the place. Many of them were really cool, like the pen-shaped scanner that can store 1,000 pages of ASCII text. But sooner or later all of them need to be connected to a PC for uploading or downloading data. For that reason I don't think that the question should be PC or Internet appliances. We need both, and we shall have more—better, faster, and cheaper at COMDEX in 2000.

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