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Four new PCs from Tandy

Summary.

Tandy announced four new PCs July 27, including two new low-end models with MS-DOS and Tandy's DeskMate graphical user interface built in. These computers continue Tandy's emphasis on making low-cost, easy-to-use computers for the masses.

Tandy also introduced a new educational networking system for schools, and announced a new online information service for DeskMate users.

The new releases strengthen Tandy's already strong product line, especially at the low end. Tandy should continue its healthy sales to home and small business users, and its efforts in education will be strengthened. In sales to large businesses, however, Tandy seems for the moment to have backed away from last year's push for increased market share.

The Announcements

Four new computers, network products. On July 27, Tandy Corporation made its annual announcement of new personal computers. The four new CPUs this year include two low-cost models with MS-DOS and the DeskMate user interface built into ROM. The company also premiered workgroup and educational networking systems using the DeskMate interface, and announced a connection with PC-Link, an online information service provided by Quantum Computer Services. The PC-Link software also works under DeskMate.

Low-end computers: Extensions to the 1000 line. Two new computers were added to Tandy's 1000 line. They are aggressively priced, and include some built-in hardware aimed at increasing ease of use. The Models 1000 TL and SL both feature MS-DOS 3.3 and Tandy's DeskMate user interface built into ROM, along with an 80,000-word spell-checker usable with the computers' bundled word processor. They also have new sound-digitizing hardware and software built in.

The TL (roughly \$1,500 when fully configured) has an 80286 CPU, giving it a claimed speed three times that of IBM's more expensive Model 25 and Model 30. The SL is an 8086 system costing about \$1,000 when fully configured,

with performance equivalent to those IBM models.

Midrange: The Model 3000 NL. The latest member in Tandy's 80286-based line, the Model 3000 NL claims performance "approaching" that of IBM's new PS/2 Model 50Z, but for about 75% the cost. The NL features a 10 MHz CPU, seven AT-compatible expansion slots, and an additional high-speed memory expansion slot.

The high-end Model 4000 LX. An enhanced version of the Model 4000 released last year, the 4000 LX features a 20 MHz 80386 processor. This makes it Tandy's fastest PC, on a par with all but the fastest 80386 systems from vendors like IBM and Compaq. However, its price when fully configured is not much lower than IBM's, making this Tandy model relatively unexciting. Tandy seems to be positioning it as a potential multiuser Unix CPU, a theme it tried fitfully with some other models last year.

The 4000 LX has three front positions for hard or floppy disk drives, and one internal position. There is also an optional SCSI disk drive controller. Like most of Tandy's computers, it supports the standard PC-AT bus. The year-old Model 4000 was also slightly revised; it received a plug-in position for an 80387 math coprocessor, and an option for an internal 3.5-inch hard disk.

Networking and communications products. Last year Tandy announced TandyLink, a low-cost networking system using AppleTalk protocols. Some workgroup options built into the DeskMate software supported simple functions like electronic mail and maintenance of a group calendar. In the latest announcements, Tandy extended this networking system into schools.

The new SchoolMate networking system uses TandyLink or 3Com networks, and runs under the DeskMate interface. This classroom networking system features applications with names like Roster, Grade Book, Lesson Scheduler, and Exam Maker. We have not yet seen it in action; when the system was premiered at the National Educational Computing Conference in June, it failed to function. Tandy claims that more than 80 applications run under SchoolMate, with more on the way. The suggested retail price of SchoolMate, including 3Com's 3+Share, is \$999.95.

Tandy also announced PC-Link, an online database service provided by Quantum Computer Services. The price for basic service (stock quotes, movie reviews, etc.) is \$9.95 per month. An extra-cost service, including things like electronic mail and online tutors to help with homework, costs ten cents per minute.

Other announcements. Some of the software bundled with DeskMate was revised. Text, the word processor, now includes mail merge and a spelling checker. Address is a new card file system. Other DeskMate applications include Calendar, Music, Sound, and Draw. Tandy announced that both PC-Link and DeskMate will be sold separately to the public for use on non-Tandy

machines.

Significance to Apple

Emphasis on user interface at low end. Tandy clearly hopes to use the DeskMate user interface to help it sell low-cost computers to home users and other first-time buyers. Building DeskMate and MS-DOS into ROM makes the machines self-booting, and very easy to learn. Tandy's promotional material for DeskMate reads like a Macintosh brochure. One press release says, "DeskMate's unique benefit is the common user interface it provides for diverse applications. Each new application looks and feels familiar, and learning time is cut to a minimum."

However, there is little DeskMate software available from companies other than Tandy (despite a year's worth of evangelism). In practice, the interface's main use is as a visual file manager and a tool for launching the applications bundled with DeskMate. Although DeskMate is low-performance compared to Macintosh, it is an improvement over the MS-DOS command prompt.

One very interesting competition this fall may be between DeskMate and the graphical file-management interface now built into the new DOS 4.0. If the new DOS interface is embraced by the market, DeskMate could become almost irrelevant.

Competition to the Apple II line. Like the other 1000-series computers introduced by Tandy last year, the new 1000s provide stiff price-performance competition to the Apple II line. For about \$1,500, the new Model 1000 TL provides hardware equivalent to the early IBM PC-ATs! However, Tandy continues to completely ignore Apple in its marketing materials, while making frequent and direct comparisons to IBM, Compaq, and other vendors of PC-compatible systems.

A continuing push in education. Tandy continues to develop its relationship with 3Com, but it is not yet clear exactly what sort of classroom functionality the companies are pushing toward. Although Tandy characterized its SchoolMate system as an educational networking system, it did not specify what operations the network will perform or which software programs will take advantage of the network. SchoolMate may turn out to be little more than a networking system with some standard education-oriented applications and support for file exchange.

Conclusion

Tandy continues to produce high-quality computers at very competitive prices. It now calls itself the leading supplier of PC-compatible computers, a

title that it has probably earned in terms of units sold. Tandy's activity at the low end of the market is especially impressive, and it should continue to be one of the strongest vendors of computers for home and small business use.

In the mainstream business market, Tandy also has good products, but it sometimes seems that no one is listening. Last year Tandy made a big effort to gain sales to corporations, with a lot of new hardware and PR support. The results were less than inspirational. This year Tandy seems to have gone back to emphasizing sales to its traditional customers. The large business market has not been forgotten, but it seems to be taking a back seat for the time being.