

Japan is the world's second biggest computer market after the United States. For serious developers wishing to get rich, ignoring this market would be unwise, but understandable due to the language difficulties including the 'nightmare-ish' Japanese writing system. This means that all software for the Japanese market has to be, what is called, two-byte enabled. Simply explained, this means that for western language each character takes up one byte of memory, for oriental and some middle eastern languages, they take up two-bytes per character. This is due to the complexity of the writing systems of these countries.

Developers that have spent time to develop two-byte versions of their software and provide the appropriate documentation & box design, then have to go through the Japanese distribution system to sell their product. This distribution system is layered quite intricately and due to the Japanese way of doing things, stores will not usually bypass the suppliers even if they could get a lower price directly themselves. Good communication between the suppliers and the software developer is essential for a product to be sold well. Developers with a well established product who have spent time preparing well for the Japanese market, will often find that their efforts will be well rewarded. This is often due to the very large volume of consumers in Japan, and in particular Tokyo.

For those developers without the resources to enter the Japanese market themselves, a strategic Japan based partner is essential. However, the developer must possess an incredible amount of patience and be prepared to supply an almost infinite amount of information to the Japan based partner in order for the relationship to go smoothly. Negotiations can often take 6 to twelve

months before any concrete decisions are made. This often frustrates the developer, who usually wants results as soon as possible. Anyone who has dealt with the Japanese market will know that to be successful here, you do need an incredible amount of patience and tenacity, as well as be prepared to supply most, if not all, the information asked for.

One of the successful US companies that entered the Japanese market is the former Claris Corp, now renamed and regrouped as FileMaker inc. In General, Claris' products have done extremely well in Japan. For ClarisWorks, this was with the international community who needed Japanese ability in their English based ClarisWorks. Being two-byte enabled from ClarisWorks 4 allowed this. Using the Japanese Language kit by Apple, enabled the English (or other language) Mac to have Japanese language capabilities, and ClarisWorks allowed Japanese to be used. There are of course Japanese only versions of the product but for someone who is more comfortable working with an English application but needs to read or write Japanese, to whatever degree, ClarisWorks 4-E (English) was a 'Killer App'!

Another Claris product, FileMaker Pro has come from almost nowhere to be the third best selling database in Japan with about a 15% market share. It is cross-platform, like ClarisWorks, and networkable. This is extremely important for so many companies that invested heavily in Macs in the early nineties, and find that a complete transition over to PC's too costly or undesirable. Now, a company can have a mixture of both Macs and PC's using the same database hosted, for example, on a Windows NT server.

However, the majority of companies taking these steps seem to be non Japanese ones. This is due to the fact that until recently, the majority of Japanese companies relied heavily on 'sneaker-net'. That is, using a floppy disk to transfer files from one computer to another, which often means running up and down several flights of stairs to various departments. This is changing though, but not as rapidly as one might think given the size of the Japanese market. I am sure that it will be quite a number of years before the average Tokyo based Japanese company office can match its overseas western counterpart in office automation. This of course, makes Japan a very lucrative market for those willing to invest in learning Japanese to go along with their MIS/IT skills. For those of us already here, it means getting more familiar with Japanese versions of the products we use

For multinational companies with a mixture of both Japanese and non-Japanese reading staff, (I emphasize reading and not speaking here), having a multi/bi-lingual version of software is a real boon to both production and communication. There are not many applications that have these features and on the Mac, most Japanese application menus have had to be changed to English using RESEDIT. Still, this does not get around problems such as field labels in databases. But, by using the Japanese version of FileMaker, a developer can add single or other two byte languages to a database, to create multi/bi-lingual versions of a database solution. PAGE is one of a number doing this type of development in Japan, and in coming months, I will be covering, with my database programming partner Steve Cassidy, a number of topics related to FileMaker Pro. We will discuss how to make better, more practical and sophisticated databases, including adding multi language features.

So until next time, Sayonara!

Sincerely,

Shin Inoue
President
PAGE Japan, Ltd.
Distinctively Practical