



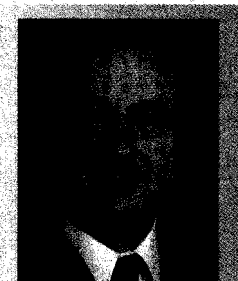
Handheld Computers: Choose The Right Tool For The Job

▲ With demand high for mobile computing solutions, VARs shouldn't underestimate the importance of selling the appropriate handheld for an application.

by Dan Schell

Would you ever use a sledgehammer to drive a nail? Not likely. On the other hand, you probably wouldn't use a hammer to break up concrete. Having the right tool for a job can mean the difference between a lot of cussing and a feeling of accomplishment. Unfortunately, sometimes it's easy to forget the significance of this lesson when it's not you using the tool.

All of the representatives from the handheld computer vendors I interviewed for this article said that occasionally VARs take a "one-size-fits-all" attitude when it comes to selling handheld computers. In other words, you only carry sledgehammers, so you sell sledgehammers to everyone – regardless of the job. "One of the most common mistakes I see VARs making when selecting a handheld computer is recommending a product from one manufacturer solely based on the VAR's relationship with that vendor," stated George Baraona, national accounts manager at Casio Inc. (Dover, NJ). Of course this isn't always true; most VARs and integrators know the importance of choosing hardware that meets the needs of an application. But what VAR hasn't met a customer unhappy with its current hardware – and the VAR that sold it? "When choosing a handheld computer, VARs should consider the importance of preserving the stored data and minimizing failures," said Pat Berstein, VP North American channel partners at Psion Teklogix (Mississauga, Ontario). "If the handheld unit is not practical to use in the customer's environment, loses its data, or fails too much, it does not matter how elegant the solution is from a systems standpoint."



Pat Berstein, VP North American channel partners, Psion Teklogix



Vinnie Luciano, VP of product management, mobile computing, Symbol Technologies

Mobile Computing's Outlook Still Profitable

One thing is for sure: The mobile computing bandwagon still has plenty of seats available. As prices continue to fall for this technology, companies of all sizes are continuing to seek mobile computing solu-

tions. Even those companies that were early adopters years ago are now searching for their next generation of products.

In its U.S. Mobile Worker Population Forecast and Analysis, 2002-2006 report, market research and advisory firm IDC estimates the mobile field worker population will grow from 11.8 million individuals in 2002 to 13.3 million by 2006. "Mobile field workers have traditionally collected data with DOS-based handheld devices, said Kevin Burden, IDC's program manager for smart handheld devices. "[Today's] mobile field worker has a real need for ruggedized, vertical-specific, and horizontally focused mobile devices,"

Understand What 'Rugged' Really Means

Whenever talk of mobile computing comes up, the term ruggedized always seems to be mentioned. The problem is, ruggedized can mean different things to different vendors. "Drop specs are probably the feature most people use to judge the ruggedness of a handheld," said Vinnie Luciano, VP of product management, mobile computing for Symbol Technologies (Holtsville, NY). "Unfortunately there is no standard for conducting a drop spec."

Four feet is the most common height cited in drop specs for handhelds. VARs should ask vendors how their drop spec tests were conducted. For instance, ask what was the hard surface the unit was dropped onto. Some variations include concrete, concrete covered in steel, and wood – all of which have different effects on a handheld. And remember, there is no correlation between a drop spec and long-term performance.

One type of ruggedness that does have a standardized test is the IP (ingress protection) rating. IP codes classify the degree of protection provided by enclosures of electrical equipment. IP codes are usually cited when devices are said to be able to withstand harsh environments. Of course, the question is: What is a harsh environment? As Luciano noted, things like dust and liquids aren't just encountered in the "harsh environment" of the outdoors.

According to Sheila O'Neil, director of channel sales at Panasonic Computer Solutions Company (Secaucus, NJ), an IP54 rating for



Sheila O'Neil, director of channel sales, Panasonic Computer Solutions Company



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water and dust resistance is the minimum requirement VARs should seek for handhelds. "Make sure vendor claims regarding ruggedness are accurate," she said. "VARs should request third party certification [i.e. Southwest Research Institute] for scientific, objective verification of ruggedization compliance. Also, quantify that ruggedization test parameters are maintained after WAN [wide area network] or WLAN [wireless LAN] equipment is added."

Who Needs A GUI Or Color?

In addition to ruggedness, VARs need to consider if a customer's application warrants a GUI (graphical user interface). While running Windows CE on a handheld may be an impressive feature, it may also be overkill. "If the way people use the technology isn't going to change [i.e. keeping DOS-based applications], then changing the handheld's interface isn't going to alter the user's actions or needs," commented Luciano. Nowhere is this statement truer than in a warehouse environment.

The programs used in warehouses are typically designed with the simplest of interfaces to keep picking and packing productivity high and learning curves short. Unless a VAR can prove a GUI is going to help either

productivity or training, don't expect the good-old green screen to disappear any time soon. However, if the customer wants better report writing functionality, a GUI may be the better option. "Most warehouse applications do not require a GUI since the instructions are typically to move a specific quantity of an item from one location to another," Berstein said. "On the other hand, in other applications such as route accounting, it might be important to show a city map or a picture of the product being offered."

A color screen is also a new option many handheld vendors are offering. Again, the applications should drive the need for this option. O'Neil said companies with applications using maps, photos, or mechanical drawings are good targets for color screen handheld sales.

Handhelds Vs. Tablet PCs

The one point to keep in mind with handheld computers is that no matter what the degree of ruggedness or screen characteristics, these are market-specific or application-specific devices. That may be an important selling point these days as tablet PCs begin to infiltrate the mobile computing market. According to Baraona, tablet



PCs will have the biggest impact on handheld computer sales in markets where pen tablets have been used for data collection (e.g. healthcare) "The tablet PC may also encroach on some vertical markets with indoor applications where an industrial-strength pen tablet or handheld is not necessary," he said.

Actually, the exposure tablet PCs are receiving likely will help keep mobile computing solutions in demand. All a VAR needs to do is choose the right tool for the job. □

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