

Apple's Answer: The Worm is Turning

— By PATRICIA GALAGAN HURLEY, Editor

Learning to use a personal computer can be a painful experience, and Malcolm Knowles is not alone in feeling frustrated. Among the legions of today's microcomputer users are many struggling learners and many who share the view that the industry has not paid enough attention to principles of adult learning nor to the educational needs of users. Apple's official reply to Malcolm Knowles' memorandum to Steven Jobs and the computer industry stated, "We, too, feel that the greatest challenge ahead of our industry is the ability to educate the public in the use of personal computers."

Things have been happening too fast, judging from statistics. Apple's sales in 1982 were \$583 million (up 74 percent from 1981). This is an amazing record for a company that entered the market seriously only six years ago. However, areas such as supporting documentation and training didn't keep up with the expanding market—until recently.

Apple's manuals are a good case in point. The Apple II Reference Manual, published in January 1978, is a kind of ur-document, resembling a hastily gathered collection of papers from the garage where Steven Jobs worked on early Apples. Some portions are typewritten—on more than one typewriter. Others are computer printed in an eye-crippling pointilist typeface. Certain sketches, that

seem to be copied straight from a paper napkin, assume skill with a soldering iron. A paragraph telling how to adjust the volume level of a tape contains such technological asides as, "When loading a tape, the Apple II needs a signal of about 2½ to 5 volts peak-to-peak." The manual's writing style mimics the sorts of conversations one overhears in computer stores and are best measured in buzz words per minute.

"The early manuals were produced piecemeal," admitted Martha Steffen, Apple's director of publications, "and they were written for an audience of computer hobbyists." They assumed a knowledge of the computer's characteristic way of processing information and a willingness to adapt to it.

But, as Malcolm Knowles points out, not all adult learners start from the same knowledge base, and when Apple's market grew to include family and business users, the early manuals were found wanting.

"We didn't handle the problem of different knowledge bases very adroitly at first," said Steffen. For a time, Apple provided four manuals with each computer. Early this year, the company issued a one-volume owner's manual for the Apple IIe.

From the first sentence we know this document isn't addressed to computer cognoscenti: "This manual is the first book you should read when you open

the Apple IIe. All other manuals for the Apple IIe assume that you have read this book. This manual is arranged so you can find the information you want quickly and easily, without having to read things you aren't interested in just yet." It goes on to recommend chapters for various kinds of readers, such as the first-time user, the experienced computer user, the programmer or the business person.

"While the old manuals just evolved, the new ones are very carefully planned," explained Steffen. "Our operating and systems manuals are written for a technical audience. They're organized by commands or command sets. That's the old-fashioned way. The new-fashioned way is called the cookbook approach, and it's organized around the most common tasks the user will encounter."

Manuals are developed in two stages simultaneously with the products they support. There is input from engineering and marketing staff, but a professional writer puts them together, on an Apple, naturally. During the alpha or developmental stage, manuals are tested on naive and experienced users. User input forms are provided with each manual released to the market.

Steffen pointed out some of the problems confronting the manual writer, problems that will be familiar to the trainer. The manual must hold the reader's hand at first but still be effective when skills have increased. It

must not lose people at either end of the skill spectrum, and it must present and keep clear some of the most abundant jargon in a technological field.

The result of planning, testing and user-awareness is a highly polished Apple product. It describes what you are going to learn (e.g., formatting: "One of the services of an operating system program is taking blank disks and preparing them to receive information. This is called formatting.") and why you need to learn it ("Formatting writes concentric circles of zeroes on the disk, like chalk lines on a racetrack, so the disk drive knows where to write the information later."). Each time a new computer term occurs, it is printed in boldface type and defined in simple language. The manual includes a glossary, an index and a bibliography of additional sources. The whole package is sensibly spiral bound (to stay open on your desk) into a cover that also acts as a bookmark.

But what about the Apple II owners like Malcolm Knowles, using older manuals that aren't so learner-centered? Apple states that it is seeking input from customers about what is unclear in these manuals and that it is creating self-paced tutorials that go through product features step by step. Knowles would prefer that such tutorials teach how to use product features for specific tasks.

Apple is considering a newsletter or updatable book to help users share their learning experiences and mentioned improved training programs for dealers. Whether this includes some orientation to adults as learners was not mentioned.

Steven Jobs, Apple chairman, said in a recent *Fortune* interview, "I figured that we could sell five or 10 times as many computers in the office if they were easy to use." Malcolm Knowles would probably add, "and five or 10 times more than that if they were easy to learn to use."



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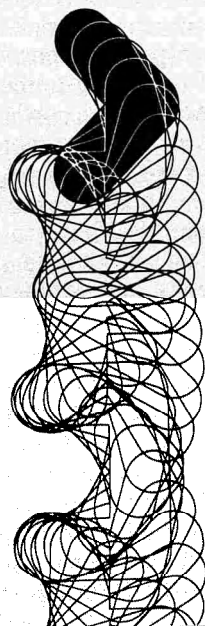
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