Wired News: More Signal, Less Noise.

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Cover Story

December 3, 1996

Third Annual Readers' Choice Awards

From a script written by our readers, we report the stars, the supporting actors, and the hopefuls

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SOFTWARE	HARDWARE	STORES, ISPs, ETC.
Word Processor	Desktop System	Best National
Spreadsheet	Notebook System	Superstore
Database	Handheld Personal	Best Local Chain
General Communications	Digital Assistant	Best Small Retailer
Web Browser	Laser Printer	(Three Stores or Less)
Fax Program	Inkjet Printer	Best Mail-Order Firm
Operating System	Hard Drive	Best National Online
Desktop Publishing	Removable Drive	Service
Draw Program	Tape Drive	Best ISP
Image Manipulation	CD-ROM Drive	Best Website
Utility	Sound Card	Best Computer Book
Presentation	Monitor	
Project Manager	Video Board	
Personal Information	Fax/Modem	
Manager	Scanner	
Accounting	Digital Camera	
Personal Finance	Input Device	
Tax Program	Best Service/Technical	
Shareware	Support: Hardware	
Game		
CD-ROM		
Best Service/Technical		
Support: Software		

The music swells. A young man gambols across a meadow toward his love.
Voice-over: "It was a time of passion. A time of romance. A time of rebooting."
Music: Timpani drums rumble.
Shot: A young woman in period costume is fretfully sifting through software and spare parts, trying to figure out which products to vote for.
Voice-over: "At that one moment in history when someone had to take a stand-"
Shot: Montage of peasants storming the Bastille, the Battleship Potemkin being captured by the proletariat, users pelting Bill Gates with Mac floppies, etc.
Voice-over: "thousands raised their voices in unison and shook a sleeping nation to its senses, crying, 'It's Microsoft, stupid!'"

OK, maybe we're exaggerating the impact of this year's Readers' Choice Awards just a bit. But for the third year in a row, thousands of Computer Currents readers stormed the windmills of computer industry hype and political correctness and gave them a big, fat raspberry. In an election-year, Clintonesque turn of events, readers who trust Bill Gates about as much as they trust that

other Bill nonetheless gave Microsoft products an overwhelming roar of approval. This may not be a revelation, but ponder the following numbers and then call your stockbroker.

In 1994, Microsoft won nine categories, took second in five, and placed in nine. The 1995 numbers were almost identical. But this year, Microsoft clearly owns the hearts and desktops of our readers: The company received nine first places, nine second places, and nine other places. Look carefully in some categories and you'll often see Microsoft won by a landslide, while some poor wretch (often a former software colossus) scooped up the crumbs.

One might conclude Microsoft has bamboozled everyone on the planet. Justice Department aside, I don't think that's the case. While a number of other vendors managed to win a category or two, Microsoft owns the software market. The only reason-aside from a very powerful marketing arm-is Microsoft products work well. In categories where it once did poorly, such as Project Management, Presentations, Database, and Service/Support, Microsoft hitched up its polyester pants and got down to work. It listened to users, revamped interfaces, and turned so-so products into winners. This is one name brand that's earned its good name.

It's a trend you see repeated across the spectrum of votes. On the hardware side, you'll see familiar names from last year: HP, IBM, Dell, Gateway, and Western Digital. Quality sells with Computer Currents readers.

BEYOND MICROSOFT?

But even if Microsoft and a handful of hardware megacorps own the market, there are some intriguing hints of things to come. For starters, not everything is velvet in the world of St. Bill. A paradigm shift is here. Desktop computers and traditional online services are being left behind in favor of small, handheld computers-cum-communicators and the free-wheeling Internet. Sift through the results and you'll see Internet programs like Netscape and Eudora popping their heads up. Check out the new Web Browser category and you'll discover it garnered the third highest number of votes of all the categories.

And what of the much-hyped Windows 95? While it easily captured the operating system category (more than doubling its votes from last year), votes for applications tell a somewhat different story. In the Word processor, Spreadsheet, Database, Draw, and Presentation categories-areas that Microsoft owns-a hefty minority of readers are sticking with Windows 3.1 versions. This statistic mirrors market surveys that show consumers are enthusiastically upgrading to Win-dows 95 while businesses, especially big businesses, are not.

There are fewer surprises in the hardware section, but one thing seems clear: Consumers are becoming a big force in the market. For example, Gateway's Family PC line took the top Desktop prize. Small office/home office printers like the LaserJet 5P and Stylus Color inkjet dominate, and fast CD-ROM drives and 32-bit sound cards (for games and home titles) are de rigueur. Cheapie scanners and digital cameras are suddenly in view, and cozy online services like America Online are overwhelmingly popular.

BY THE NUMBERS

Before you stroll through the Readers' Choice results, here are a few background notes for your amusement. We tabulated every ballot we received by the deadline. Three ballots were chosen at random; those lucky readers won some fabulous prizes. (For more envy-inducement, check out the accompanying sidebars by Doug Dineley.) The vendors that took first place in their categories not only get a stunning trophy and a firm handshake. they can also use the Readers' Choice logo for marketing and product packaging. Look for the RCA logo. It's your mark of quality.

As for the results, we've noted how many readers voted in a given category. Within that pool of votes, we've identified what percentage each company received. For example, in the Word processor category, 81 percent of all the ballots we received cast a vote for a word processing program. Of those votes, Word 7 received 47 percent.

MOVERS, SHAKERS, AND QUAKERS

If you're ready for raw data. go ahead and jump to our RCA winners list. But here are a few thoughts for the armchair analyst within.

- Vote splitting. Word 7, Excel 7, and Access 7 take the prizes, but a cadre of users are sticking with Windows 3.1 versions of these programs.

- Shareware rules. In General communications and elsewhere, shareware and former shareware products continue to stake a claim. thanks in large part to the Internet boom. Procomm Plus for Windows 95, thanks to its kitchen sinkÐfaxÐWeb browser suite of modules, is top dog. Eudora, competent and cheap, is an email favorite. And WinZip takes the shareware crown from PKZip, it's inspiration.
- Been there, done that. The Web browser wars are over. Netscape won. Or Microsoft will. Next!
- It's a Web Web Web Web World. Internet email, Web browsers, Windows NT (a favorite for intranet setups), and 33.6Kbps modems all receive your votes for the first time.
- Big Blue Boo Hoo. IBM's positively-reviewed Aptiva barely makes the Desktop system list. And OS/2 receives even less votes this year, dropping from seven to three percent.
- Make it simple, stupid! PageMaker's 1995 lead over Microsoft Publisher shrinks by 16 percent. Paint Shop Pro is nipping at Photoshop's heels. The message: simple is good.
- Stay awake! PKWare, creator of the beloved DOS-based PKZip, watches its hold evaporate while others--notably Niko Mak's WinZip—create easy-to-use Windows versions. PKWare's PKZip for Windows finally shipped this month.
- Maybe they should rename the company Kumquat. Apple continues to slide. System 7.x slips three percentage points this year, not a single PowerMac makes the desktop computer cut. the PowerBook moves from first to last in the Notebook category. and the Newton faces a serious challenge from a U.S. Robotics PDA. (The irony is the U.S. Robotics Pilot is strictly an organizer; it

doesn't offer any communications features. Does this modem manufacturer know something Apple doesn't?)

- Zip Zip Hooray! The people speak: By unofficial proclamation, the Iomega Zip drive is the PC/Mac floppy drive of the '90s. Everyone else can go home.
- No Scan Scam. The cheap scanners arrive: Paperport, Pagescan, and Vista. More are coming. Check out our January buyers' guide from scanmeister Bob Weibel for the details.
- CompuServe is dead, long live CompuServe! Beloved by techies and shunned by new users, CompuServe gets routed by America Online for the second year in a row. In 1994, CIS and AOL were roughly tied. This year, AOL takes 73 percent of the votes. P.S. The Microsoft Network (MSN) triples its votes this year, vaulting to, um, third place with three percent of the vote.
- We're all dummies on this bus. IDG's Dummies series takes top prize for the third year running (thanks, no doubt, in part to such titles as "Golf for Dummies," "Sex for Dummies," and "Ventriloquism for Dummies"), demonstrating once again that there's too much stuff to learn about computers.

SOFTWARE

Word processor	% of votes received
Word 7, Microsoft	47
Word 6, Microsoft	23
WordPerfect 7, Corel	9
WordPerfect 6.x, Corel	8
Works, Claris	3
Others	10
81 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Spreadsheet	% of votes received
Excel 7, Microsoft	50
Excel 5, Microsoft	30
1-2-3, Lotus	9
Quattro Pro, Corel	3
Others	8
62 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Database	% of votes received
Access 7, Microsoft	38
Access 2, Microsoft	18
FileMaker Pro, Claris	10
Paradox, Borland	8
Approach, Lotus	4
Others	22
43 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

General Communications	% of votes received
Procomm Plus, Quarterdeck	29
WinComm Pro, Delrina	9
QModem Pro, Mustang Software	5
Eudora, Qualcomm	5
Others	52
30 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Web Browser	% of votes received
Navigator 3.0, Netscape	50
Internet Explorer, Microsoft	22
Navigator 2.x, Netscape	19
Others	9
67 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Fax Program	% of votes received
WinFax Pro, Delrina	54
QuickLink, Smith Micro	8
Fax, Microsoft	7
GlobalFax, Global Village	5
Procomm Plus, Quarterdeck	4
Others	22
36 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Operating System	% of votes received
Windows 95, Microsoft	61
System 7.5, Apple	11
Windows 3.1, Microsoft	8
Windows NT, Microsoft	7
MS-DOS 6.x, Microsoft	5
OS/2 Warp 4, IBM	3
Others	5
74 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Desktop publishing	% of votes received
PageMaker, Adobe	35
Publisher, Microsoft	27
Windows 3.1, Microsoft	8
QuarkXPress, Quark	7
PagePlus, Serif	5
CorelDraw, Corel	5
Others	21
31 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Draw program	% of votes received
CorelDraw 6, Corel	33
Illustrator, Adobe	12
CorelDraw 7, Corel	8
AutoCAD, Autodesk	7
Others	40
33 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Image manipulation	% of votes received
Photoshop, Adobe	47
Paint Shop Pro, JASC	13
CorelDraw, Corel	8
Painter, Fractal Design	5
Paintbrush, Microsoft	4
Others	23
29 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Utility	% of votes received
Norton Utilities, Symantec	51
WinZip, Nico Mak	9
Norton AntiVirus, Symantec	8
PKZip, PKWare	3
Virus Scan, McAfee	3
Others	26
44 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Presentation	% of votes received
PowerPoint 7, Microsoft	56
PowerPoint 4, Micorsoft	21
Freelance Graphics, Lotus	4
Harvard Graphics, Software Publishing	3
Others	16
30 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Project manager	% of votes received
Project, Microsoft	64
TimeLine, Symantec	4
WordPerfect Suite, Corel	4
Others	28
10 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Personal Information manager	% of votes received
Organizer, Lotus	21
SideKick, Starfish	18
Schedule 95, Microsoft	14
Act, Symantec	9
Now Up-to-Date, Now Software	4
Others	34
20 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Accounting	% of votes received
Quicken, Intuit	34
QuickBooks Intuit	31
Accounting, Peachtree	10
Complete Accounting, Peachtree	5
Money, Microsoft	5
Excel, Microsoft	5
Others	10
25 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Personal finance	% of votes received
Quicken, Intuit	70
Money, Microsoft	15
Managing Your Money, MECA	4
Quicken for Mac	2
Others	9
38 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Tax program	% of votes received
TurboTax, Intuit	48
Quicken, Intuit	12
MacInTax, Intuit	10
Personal Tax Edge, Parson's Technology	7
TaxCut, Kiplinger	7
Others	16
19 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Shareware	% of votes received
WinZip, Nico Mak	22
Paint Shop Pro, JASC	11
PKZip, PKWare	6
Quake, id Software	4
Notes, Lotus	3
Others	54
24 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Game	% of votes received
Duke Nukem 3D, 3D Realms	10
Warcraft 2, Blizzard	8
Quake, id Software	8
Myst, Broderbund	7
Doom, id Software	6
Others	61
44 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

CD-ROM	% of votes received
Encarta. Microsoft	14
Bookshelf, Microsoft	8
Electronic Encyclopedia, Grolier	6
Myst, Broderbund	6
Others	66
23 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Best service/technical support: software	% of votes received
Microsoft	20
Symantec	11
Intuit	6
Apple Computer	5
Adobe	4
Others	54
21 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

HARDWARE

Desktop system	% of votes received
Family PC, Gateway 2000	16
XPS Dimension, Dell	13
Millenia, Micron	7
Aptiva, IBM	6
Vectra, HP	5
Others	53
42 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Notebook system	% of votes received
Thinkpad, IBM	19
Tecra, Toshiba	17
Latitude, Dell	13
PowerBook, Apple	8
Others	43
24 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Handheld personal digital assistant	% of votes received
Newton, Apple	30
Pilot, U.S. Robotics	19
OmniGo Organizer, Hewlett-Packard	13
Wizard, Sharp	7
Others	31
12 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Laser printer	% of votes received
LaserJet 5P, Hewlett-Packard	13
LaserJet 4, Hewlett-Packard	11
LaserJet 5, Hewlett-Packard	9
LaserJet 5L, Hewlett-Packard	9
LaserJet 5M, Hewlett-Packard	5
Others	53
47 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Inkjet printer	% of votes received
Stylus Color, Epson	19
BJC-620, Canon	7
DeskJet 870cxi, Hewlett-Packard	7
DeskJet 855C, Hewlett-Packard	6
DeskJet 682C, Hewlett-Packard	5
Others	56
54 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Hard drive	% of votes received
Western Digital	47
Seagate	17
Maxtor	12
Quantum	11
Conner Peripherals	3
Others	10
38 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Removable drive	% of votes received
Zip, Iomega	55
Jaz, Iomega	22
EZ135, SyQuest	9
Zip 100, Epson	3
Others	11
34 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Tape drive	% of votes received
HP/Colorado Memory Systems	36
Ditto, Iomega	25
Tape-Stor, Conner	12
Others	11
27 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

CD-ROM drive	% of votes received
8Plex, Plextor	10
8x, Toshiba	9
8x, Sony	6
Multispin 4x, NEC	5
Others	70
36 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Sound card	% of votes received
Sound Blaster AWE32, Creative Labs	46
Sound Blaster 16, Creative Labs	32
Sound Blaster 32, Creative Labs	11
Soundscape, Ensoniq	3
Others	8
40 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Monitor	% of votes received
MultiSync XV17, NEC	23
DX1795, MAG/InnoVision	8
17PS, Viewsonic	8
Multiscan 17sf II, Sony	8
Others	53
45 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Video board	% of votes received
MGA Millenium, Matrox	24
Stealth 64, Diamond Multimedia	19
Stealth 3D 2000, Diamond Multimedia	16
Imagine 128, Number Nine	7
Others	34
29 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Fax/modem	% of votes received
Sportster 28.8, U.S. Robotics	34
Sportster 33.6, U.S. Robotics	15
SupraFaxModem 28.8, Diamond Multimedia	6
Teleport Platinum, Global Village	6
Others	35
48 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Scanner	% of votes received
ScanJet 4C, HP	30
ScanJet 4P, HP	13
Paperport, Visioneer	9
Vista 56E, Umax	8
Pagescan, Logitech	7
Others	33
28 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Digital camera	% of votes received
DC 50, Kodak	31
Photo PC, Epson	12
DC40, Kodak	5
Others	52
14 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Input device	% of votes received
Mouse 2.0, Microsoft	24
Natural Keyboard, Microsoft	18
MouseMan, Logitech	12
TrackMan, Logitech	7
Trackball, Kensington	4
Others	35
32 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Best service/technical support: hardware	% of votes received
Dell	19
Hewlett-Packard	14
Gateway 2000	9
IBM	6
Apple Computer	5
Others	47
22 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

STORES, ISPs, ETC.

Best national superstore	% of votes received
CompUSA	60
Fry's Electronics	14
Computer City	9
Micro center	4
Best Buy	4
Others	10
53 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Best local chain	% of votes received
Fry's Electronics	34
CompUSA	13
NCA Computer Products	6
Computerware	5
Computown	4
Laitron Computers	3
Others	35
47 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Best small retailer (three stores or less)	% of votes received
Central Computer Systems	7
Hi-Tech USA	7
Atman MPC Computer	6
NCA Computer Products	5
UMiracle Microsystems	4
Others	69
24 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Best mail-order firm	% of votes received
Gateway 2000	12
Dell Computer	10
Tiger Direct	8
Mac Warehouse	7
Insight	7
PC Connection	6
Others	50
37 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Best national online service	% of votes received
America Online	73
CompuServe	18
Microsft Network (MSN)	3
Netcom	2
Others	5
39 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Best Internet service provider	% of votes received
Netcom	18
America Online	11
Slip.net	10
EarthLink	8
Pacific Bell	5
AT&T	5
Others	43
42 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Best World Wide Web site	% of votes received
Yahoo, www.yahoo.com	13
cinet, www.cnet.com	9
Computer Currents Interactive, www.currents.net	6
Microsoft, www.microsoft.com	5
Excite, www.excite.com	5
Others	62
39 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

Best computer book	% of votes received
Dummies series, IDG Books	35
Complete Idiots series, Que	11
"Teach Yourself Web Publishing with HTML," SAMS Publishing	7
"Windows 95 Secrets," IDG Books	6
"HTML: The Definitive Guide," O'Reilly & Associates	6
Others	35
22 percent of all respondents voted in this category	

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Robert Luhn is editor-in-chief of Computer Currents. Doug Dineley is associate editor, and Jeff Lincoln, who collated and edited the reader ballots, is the editorial assistant.

Archives for Cover Story

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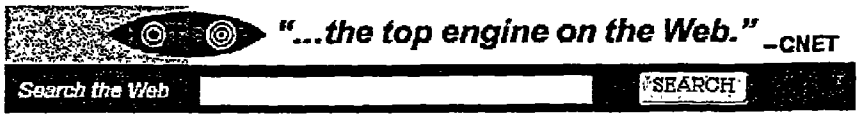

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