

## Compaq and IBM Compete on Wireless Notebooks

By Michael Cohn

Both IBM and Compaq this week announced strategies that will outfit many of their products, especially notebooks, with connections to wireless networks.

IBM intends to build wireless antennas into the screens of its ThinkPad notebooks, as well as introduce two new versions of its Palm-based WorkPads.

Compaq, for its part, is building a new line of Evo notebooks, as well as desktops, thin-client machines, and workstations. It plans to transition its Armada, Deskpro, iPaq desktop, professional workstation, and thin-client lines into the Evo line. A separate line will be devoted to Presario products for the home and small office, and a third line will be for iPaq products like the Pocket PC, MP3 player, and Web appliance. On Monday, Compaq was showcasing the Evo N400c, a \$2,299 notebook that provides an approach to wireless access that is different from IBM's. Compaq is offering a wireless module called the MultiPort that slides onto the back of the display enclosure.

The initial MultiPort will provide access to 802.11b wireless LANs and will be available next month for under \$200, according to Jeff Groudan, Compaq's director of portable product marketing for commercial portables. A Bluetooth version will be available later this summer, and he expects a version for either GPRS (General Packet Radio Service) or cdma2000 1XRTT wireless networks to be out by the end of the year.

The modular nature of the MultiPort offers an advantage over IBM's built-in approach, according to Groudan.

"It gives users a lot more flexibility," he claims. "It allows customers to change their wireless connectivity solution on the fly. They may want to use 802.11 in the office and then use GPRS outside. Most of our competitors are using mini-PCI solutions. Their antenna goes into the display enclosure or the bottom of the notebook so you don't have the ability to migrate or upgrade."

IBM, however, claims that its solution offers stronger signal strength than other wireless integrated notebooks. It's also taking aim at other notebook vendors like Dell and Gateway that have been offering wireless access through PC Card add-ons.

IBM is entering the wireless arena in other ways, too.

This week, the company announced a pilot project involving the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas, which will be using the IBM eServer iSeries to wirelessly check in guests this summer and help them check out.

The Venetian's roving agents will be carrying Symbol Technology's Palm-based handheld devices, which contain scanners that can read credit cards and encode room keys. Agents will also be wearing small printers around their belts, so they can print out room bills and receipts. Lansa worked with Inter-American Data (IAD) to develop the wireless application, which ties into IAD's hotel registration software on the IBM systems at the back end.

"We want to create an application that allows us to provide guests with a top-level, technologically advanced experience from the moment they step on our property," says Kurt Ouchida, director of communications at the hotel. "We'll be able to use a pen-based Graffiti software system, and our readers will confirm room reservations, log check-ins, and use the scanner to authorize the guest's credit card. Essentially we are making our front desk mobile."

That will be useful for the Venetian, which often needs to accommodate large groups of guests who show up for conventions at the adjacent Sands Expo Center. The hotel now has 3,036 suites, and it's opening an 1,101-suite tower in the first quarter of next year.

Some of its competitors may benefit from the technology, too. "Once one hotel implements a technology, a lot of the other ones follow," says Bill Benjamin, vice president of business development at Lansa. "We originally rolled out another reservation system with the Riviera 18 months ago. Now other hotels like the Excalibur, Monte Carlo, Luxor, and Mandalay Bay are using it. We expect to be offering this kind of wireless application in other hotels this year."

The next time the Comdex crowd shows up, they'll encounter the latest wireless technology (not to mention Venetian gondoliers) before they even hit the show floor.

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