

ASHTON-TATE: ALL THE RIGHT MOVES

In the continuing jockeying for position between the Big Three of microcomputer software, Ashton-Tate has seemingly solidified and expanded its position.

The general business press has commented on how Chairman and CEO Ed Esber has streamlined the firm's operations, broadened its product base to include other programs besides the venerable dBase series, and generally made Ashton-Tate a serious contender for software primacy, along with Microsoft and Lotus. Ashton-Tate's recent announcements, however, speak to some of the more subtle aspects of software development and marketing.



Ashton-Tate's Esber

For example, Ashton-Tate has separated its product development efforts from its support functions. Its Systems, Service and Support Division allows for a company-wide implementation of customer support; its Software Products Division focuses on product-specific development and marketing. This simple division of labor shifts the support functions away from those who also developed the products; since developers do not necessarily make the best support personnel, Ashton-Tate should now be more responsive to customer support requirements as well as product trends.

Further, Ashton-Tate has removed all copy protection from its products—winning points with end-users—and strongly reiterated its policy of selling only through resellers—winning points there as well. The firm has obviously realized the necessity of strengthening its ties not only to end-users by a Chinese menu approach to software support, but also its symbiotic relationship with resellers. As the stakes get higher for the Big Three, resellers will support the vendors that support them. Even allowing for the fickle nature of most selling relationships, Ashton-Tate is stockpiling nuts for the winter by strongly backing its resellers now.

Neither Microsoft nor Lotus is taking all this lying down, but Ashton-Tate's moves have seemingly scored more points with both resellers and end-users than Microsoft or Lotus announcements. Stay tuned for progress reports on the tussle between these three firms for software supremacy.

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