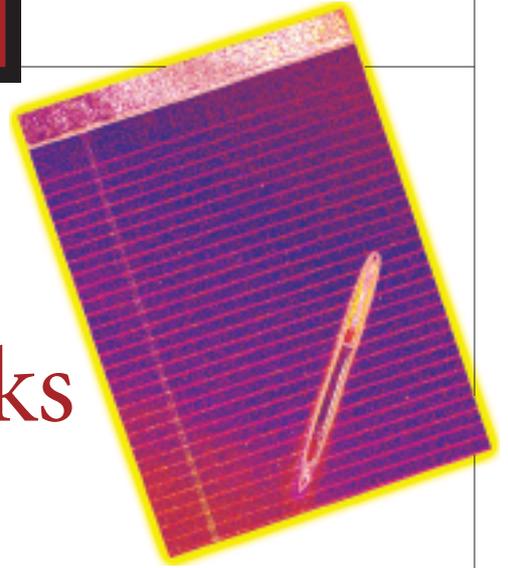


Opportunity Knocks



It could be the chance of a lifetime. The former chief competitive officer and VP of product planning at Palm Computing nudges you and hands over the design sketch and business plan for a device that he claims is “an opportunity not just to create a cool device business, but to establish an online service franchise that’s at least as big as the franchise Apple has with iTunes.”

Michael Mace should know something about Apple—he was once director of Mac Platform Marketing, and his experience at Palm and PalmSource provide a pretty solid background in handheld devices. So why would he give away this “product idea that [he] really believes in, probably more strongly than any new product in the last decade”? Three reasons: because most venture capitalists want nothing to do with funding hardware companies; because the proposed cost from design to delivery will probably be around \$20 million; “but most of all, [he] wants someone to build one of these darned things so [he] can use it.”

The device is something Mace calls the Info Pad. It’s about the size and thickness of a steno pad with a touch-sensitive screen on the front and very few buttons. Very simply, the device is “an endless notebook.” You write notes and sketch on the screen, and the “ink function” is so precise, it “puts pixels exactly where the user touches the pen.”

It might seem questionable since we already have a very economical alternative in pencils and pads, but this notepad will be able to compress and store all of your notes in one place, and it will sync to your calendar and address book. It doesn’t have handwriting recognition, except in the background where it reads

and indexes all the content. Mace figures recognition that’s 80%-90% efficient will be enough for the indexing task. A lookup function completes the indexing so that “If you write something down in an Info Pad, you’ll never forget it again.”

Add storage capacity (SD memory card slot) for keeping and reading other documents and databases, and the Info Pad becomes an archive for more than just your notes. Download all your e-mail, and take it with you. A built-in 1MB camera will provide “scanless” scans of documents and graphical information. Built-in Bluetooth wireless is essential for syncing to your PC without wires or cradle.

The Info Pad will be about 9" × 6" × 1" thick (thinner if possible). It should weigh about the same as a thick paperback book—16 ounces or less. The screen should be high-resolution grayscale with very high contrast. The e-ink technology used in Sony’s new reader would be ideal. The battery should be able to run all day with heavy use. Linux, with its community of developers, would be the best operating system, and there should be seven applications: note-taker, document viewer, calendar, contacts, to-do, calculator, and search. And that’s all.

The ideal price should be under \$300, and the initial markets would be college students and middle-aged executives. You can read about the lucrative e-books tie-in in Mace’s blog titled “Desperately Seeking the Info Pad.” Just Google the title.

So if you’d like to find a place on the history shelf next to the Palm Pilot and iPod, check with Michael Mace at www.mikemace.com. He’ll be glad to put you in touch with suppliers, manufacturers, and software people. ■