Notes on the future

Interactive presentation technology is of proven worth, but the product set is changing

TWO YEARS AGO, interactive presentations really meant two things - interactive whiteboards and schools. Primary and secondary education were (and still are) the biggest buyers of interactive technology and the interactive whiteboard (IWB) for schools market has picked up again after a slow start to 2006, which was caused by a change in funding processes rather than a lack of demand.

But with the majority of UK classrooms on their way to being fully equipped (although there is a long way to go yet and a huge replacement market for IWB-linked projectors is bound to appear), new market approaches will be needed if sales of interactive systems are to keep growing at anything like historical IWB rates.

The keys to finding and unlocking new growth markets — including corporate meetings and higher education — may prove to be very different to the ones that enabled the schools IWB boom. Government funding aside, the schools market is characterised by permanent installations in classrooms that are the preserve of a teached trained to use the system and the provision of interactive-ready content by that teacher or a range of publishers.

As interactive education continues to change and develop — with, say, the use of personal digital assistants (which have already been trialled with pupils in the Wolverhampton area) and electronic testing (aka voting) systems — those characteristics are unlikely to change. The installed base will be permanent and the presenters will be formally trained in the use of the technology.

The corporate and HE markets are likely to turn out to be structurally different.

There will be a mix of permanent and temporary/portable installations and some of the presentation rooms and lecture theatres are too big for conventional IWB installations (hence the success of products like Smart's Sympodium and Hitachi Interactive's T-15 and T-17 touch panel systems in HE markets, where they can be linked to large screen projection). Most important of all, in the corporate, public sector and HE markets much of the usage will be by 'ad hoc' and relatively (or completely) untrained users.

Those drivers are likely to push interactive presentations into being defined by the software used to drive the presentations rather than the installed hardware, with display and management systems other than IWBs — such as tablets or flat screen overlays — playing an important role in the newer interactive markets.

Steps are already being made in that direction. For example, both Smart Technologies and Hitachi are making their software available in 'portable' and personalised form on USB drives that connect the laptop to the whiteboard or as a USB software key for the laptop itself.

As well as avoiding the need to get IT departments to permanently install software on organisational laptops, that route helps get round the training problem by giving the presenter a personalised interface he or she can become familiar with.

The next step is likely to be further integration, with companies like 3touch approaching the interactive space from a different direction — that of presentation control and content management. □

Even car launches are going interactive. Ford's Geneva show stand used both touch screen overlays to control the action and Mac screens which the audience used to provide feedback. Full story P10-11

PRODUCT PREVIEW: INTERACTIVITY FROM A LAPTOP

NEXT MONTH IRISH presentation software company 3touch plans to change the interactive presentation marketplace by launching a new interactive product, Freedom, which is based on its current Connect presentation management system, but allows users to edit and annotate all file types while presenting live.

The idea is to offer the annotation features available on an electronic whiteboard or a touch panel system from the user's own laptop.

Freedom features an on-screen toolbar which allows the user to select a command to enter text or data and annotations — which can then be saved back into the work folder. Users will be able to edit on screen, change formulae in Excel, change text in Word and load and display any file on their laptop without having to drag it onto an additional monitor.

As well as being able to walk into a room — which could include lecture theatres too large to be served by a conventional interactive whiteboard — and run an annotated presentation from a laptop, 3touch is also making a laptop-based control systems interface.

Part of the standard 3touch user interface will now be equipped with a front end which allows the users to integrate with whatever room control system is in place, but without the cost of control panels.

'The solution was installed at the American University of Cairo in January of this year', says 3touch ceo Joe Browne. 'The solution complements all control systems but the user gets a unified and integrated "look and feel" and can manage all control and presentation functions from the same interface.'

www.3touch.com