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One of the things that I try to do to keep my knowledge current is to attend vendor-sponsored conferences. This is the case whether I am looking at practice management products, accounting software products, paperless products, consumer products or networking products. The fees, loss of time and related travel expenses often seem large, but, in retrospect, I usually gain enough knowledge, ask questions directly to people responsible for the decisions, benefit from networking with peers, and get to hear the product message unfiltered or interpreted by the press. I'd suggest you budget and schedule to allow people to attend conferences held by CCH, CSI, Intuit, Microsoft, Sage, Citrix and others. I also suggest that you budget and plan to attend major technology shows held by the AICPA, Sleeter, K2, Consumer Electronics, AIIM and others when considering how to spend your conference and CPE dollars.

The Microsoft Worldwide Partner Conference (MSWPC) is held annually to help Microsoft partners understand strategies for the coming year and beyond. It was particularly helpful to be in Boston this year to understand more about the release features and timing of Windows Vista and Office 2007. From main stage comments during the show, it would be my best guess that Office 2007 (and probably Vista) will ship to companies on Microsoft licensing agreements in November. Consumer shipments are likely to occur in January 2007. Negotiations have occurred between Microsoft and major hardware vendors to have an upgrade coupon available over a certain timeframe so sales can proceed during the fourth quarter. Additionally, the revisions to Vista and Microsoft Office 2007 convinced me all the more that training will be required for users. The time invested

in training will quickly come back in productivity. Forcing users to flounder

explore some of these offerings a little further.

OfficeLive

Particularly if you are a small office, you should sign up for the free OfficeLive service from Microsoft. This service provides you with a domain name and the ability to share files with SharePoint technology. Pick a domain name that is related to your existing domain name, but slightly different. Experiment with some of the portal and file transfer capabilities. Consider how the e-mail system might work for you. I think you will find that this advertising-supported service will actually solve a few business problems for you with little or no investment of money and a minimal investment of time. Office 2007 will integrate to OfficeLive. Microsoft also announced that it would host Microsoft Dynamics CRM as an OfficeLive service in 2007.

OneCare

The OneCare system from Microsoft has been maligned in the press, but my experience with the product to date has been good. Having all of the virus, malware detection, and other protection services from Microsoft seems to provide a cleaner experience on our test systems than we have had with the best of other competitive products. Microsoft will extend this in the future with the server-based System Center protection products.

Business Intelligence

Business Intelligence has moved strongly into the Microsoft Office 2007 System, with improved interfaces in Excel, PivotTables and connections to SQL 2005, as well as other data resources. The improved graphics and improved business data reporting are key advantages. Analytics providers will have to improve their products to compete with some of the new capabilities.

Geospatial Technology

in the desired area were displayed. Selecting desired parameters of space, parking, drive time and other attributes, possible alternative real estate sites were located. A potential new site was selected based on customer demographic data, and then satellite images and a bird's eye view of the potential site were used. Much of this technology was integrated with Microsoft MapPoint and Microsoft LocalLive. These two tools are available now, and I am routinely showing how to do pin maps with customer data in Excel 2007 today.

VoIP

Microsoft has a strong interest in integrating server and desktop services with VoIP. Interfaces for telephony have been around for some time through technologies like MAPI and TAPI, but the new integrations include Exchange, presence indicators, private instant messaging (IM), conference calling, conversion of voicemail to e-mail, and integration into Nortel systems. Microsoft is trying to make its IM capabilities secure for corporate communications. Using presence indicators is something that our children and younger employees have enjoyed while using instant messaging services from MSN, AOL and Yahoo! — the notification that their friends are online and available. These presence indicators will let you establish an IM session, a voice call, a conference call, and may also present geospatial GIS (people locating) information based on Microsoft ILS services, another product that is already shipping. Also included are call rerouting services to PDAs via wireless. The live demonstration of a voice call received by Steve Balmer on stage to a cell phone from a computer was pretty impressive, and surprisingly clear. The promise of having one way to find a person may be getting close. Some authors are discussing whether an e-mail address or a phone number becomes your single identifier, but Microsoft did not take a position on this.

One other interesting item to note from a demonstrated main stage application was the browser-enabled application to Microsoft Dynamics. The client was not

referred to as Dynamics NAV, Dynamics GP or any other member of the Microsoft

of the latest Microsoft development technologies. You will gain even more business purpose if your application vendor will take advantage of the many new capabilities in the Microsoft family. Again, I encourage you to attend your preferred vendor's conferences to gain insight directly from your vendor about their strategies for the next year.

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Technology

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