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When Armageddon comes, I am convinced that it will not be the result of an epic battle between good and evil, or even between the haves and the have-nots. The battle that destroys the known universe will be, as it has been for several decades now, between Microsoft, Apple and Google.

Everywhere you turn, you are confronted by the armies of these three giants,

has bundled free speech recognition software with its operating systems since Windows XP, improving the system year after year (hint: you'll find it in the "Accessories" folder). For the record, the Windows 7 iteration works amazingly well. In fact I'm dictating this paragraph via the Speech recognition program. If there's a weakness to Microsoft's implementation, it is that editing capabilities are very limited.

- **Apple** has built some limited speech recognition capabilities into its OS X operating system to assist in navigation. For dictation and editing, you will need third party "Dictate" software from Nuance. But this is just the tip of the iceberg for Apple, which has built some fairly strong voice command capabilities into the iPhone 4S, and has pushed a new, voice-driven application in its "Siri" personal assistant application.

- **Google** has no intention of being left behind in this new technology. The company has bundled voice capabilities for search into its Chrome browser, and offers robust voice command and search capabilities into the Android operating systems for cell phones.

- And then there is **Nuance**. This company is best known for its Dragon Naturally Speaking software, which cropped up in ads during the last holiday season. It is sharp, professional-level program whose only limitation is its learning curve, which is somewhat higher than that of the other products. In addition, just before last Christmas the company purchased a cell phone app maker called Vlingo, an up-and-coming player in the cell phone voice command arena with a decent app that works on Apple, Google and Blackberry devices. Whether Nuance becomes the fourth major player in this cat fight, or is simply absorbed by one of the other three, the battle is shaping quickly.

It would be nice to point clearly to a winner among these contestants, but that isn't going to happen this year.

In the cell phone arena, Vlingo and Siri are competing with in-built voice command

requires the user to use the company's Chrome browser, a program whose main function is to track everything you do online and sell that information to advertisers.

But look for things to change rapidly in 2012. With this many major players in the game and big money being thrown at the program, we can expect to see new products to shove their way into the fray, and new versions of existing products to debut regularly.

For these new products and versions to gain any traction, however, they will need to do three things that none of the products do today. First, they will have to perform easily what we do every day on our devices. An application that takes six steps to do what you can do with a single mouse-click today is not useful.

Second, they need to better accommodate differences in speaking styles, particularly the regional dialects of English. If I must learn to speak like a Maine Yankee to use the software, I won't bother.

And finally, they must be able to work with additional hardware. If they cannot work off of the microphone and speakers built into my device, they are too much trouble to work with.

Otherwise, we have four armies in contention. Let the battles begin.

Reality Check

A compendium of ideas, products, rants and raves from the viewpoint of the author. Not that the author has no financial interests in any of the products mentioned. Feel free to disagree, or to share your ideas by sending them to davemcclure@cpapracticeadvisor.com.

Internet Site of the Month: Microsoft Windows Speech Recognition.

had touched off a tablet revolution that now has low-cost devices of every kinds flowing to the marketplace. The only hitch? Many of these devices have been crippled to appease the cell phone companies. Look for this tyranny of the cellular companies to begin to unravel as the market grows and no longer needs Verizon and AT&T as a marketing channel.

[Thumbs Down] – **Forum Stuffing.** In times past, you could look to online forums for technical information, advice and even honest reviews of products. Those days are over. Today's tech forums are largely clogged with paid endorsers, posters who can't differentiate between knowledge and opinions, and psychotic flame throwers who simply enjoy controversy. If you have a favorite – free – technology forum that has avoided this infection, we'd love to hear about it.

[Thumbs Sideways] – **Blackberry.** Considering its nearly unbreakable hold on the enterprise market with its Blackberry products, Canadian firm Research In Motion hasn't done itself any favors in the past year. Its stock is down some 80 percent, the Blackberry Playbook tablet has been a marketing and technical disaster, and the company has announced that its new lines of phones based on the Blackberry 10 operating system won't be seen until at least near the end of 2012. This is a cat that has used up all of its lives, and those who are inclined to invest in Blackberry technologies for their firms should be very, very careful.

[Thumbs Down] – **Lack of Accessories.** No matter what tech gadget you purchase, one thing will be true. The device will lack decent accessories. Chargers will be slow, batteries weak, charging stands non-existent and mounting hardware left to the whims of third-party companies halfway around the globe. Because of the sheer number of devices thrown into the marketplace each year, there simply isn't a good market for accessories tailored to the size, shape and inputs of every device. Sigh! At some point, the marketplace will settle down. Until then, keep putting your device in

the coffee cup holder and hope it charges by the time you get to your next

supplies. Kudos to Kodak and Kyocera for leading this pro-consumer movement.

Technology