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I'll confess that I was never a fan of QuickBooks.

It's not that I sneered at the product as "Accounting Light," or that I thought it was too simple. Actually, it was just the opposite — I found it to be ponderous, complicated and unnecessarily mundane. So to the considerable chagrin of my own accountants, I ran most of my small business ventures from the nimble and uncomplicated Quicken instead.

Until 2005. Working for a small nonprofit that was already using QuickBooks, I was forced to take a close second look at the product and learn it well. Surprisingly, in the span of time from 2004 to 2005, QuickBooks had revolutionized itself. It was brighter, simpler and more agile. And most of the hard-core accountant-speak stuff had been replaced by easy-to-use and easy-to-understand functions.

I wasn't the only one who noticed. Today, QuickBooks dominates the small business accounting niche and is used by a quarter of a million accountants for their clients, according to Intuit. As impressive as that may be, 80 percent of these accounting firms — some 200,000 accounting firms — used QuickBooks for their own internal accounting. And with the new 2008 version, they're using it for more than just accounting.

Some recent changes at Intuit may also cause accountants to want to take a second look if they haven't already. Like most accounting software vendors, Intuit has mounted programs designed to facilitate learning and using its products — an Accountant's Advisory Council, a ProAdvisor membership program, an accountants training program, and an accounting industry team. But they've also recently added a new wrinkle worth noting — an Intuit Accounting Customer Advocate.

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are more knowledgeable than I, will dissect and denote the specifics of the new version. But there are three things I find worthy of noting:

- The Time Tracker Gadget. Introduced last year as a subscription service, this QuickBooks time and billing system is now tightly integrated with Microsoft Outlook. It converts directly from your calendar into the invoicing system. Very cool.
- E-mail Integration and Billing. In QuickBooks 2008, Microsoft Office integration has been expanded so forms can now be e-mailed directly from QuickBooks using Outlook, Outlook Express or Windows Mail, and e-mail messages can be created and sent to any contact in the customer, vendor and employee centers. Users can now click directly on the e-mail address in the invoice, and a message with the invoice attached as a PDF will open in Outlook.
- QuickBooks Billing Solutions (QBS). This is another service that has been expanded in its use of e-mail. This PayPal-style system allows users who subscribe to the QBS to include a link to the service in an e-mail, so when their customers receive the invoice they have the option of clicking on the link and paying off the bill right away.

It's not likely that I will ever give up Quicken completely. It is still about the best and most robust checkbook program on the planet. Nor am I completely

in love with QuickBooks. Its Fixed Assets capabilities could be better, and the bank reconciliation system still seems a bit clunky. But there is a reason why nearly 4 million people use QuickBooks today, and the 2008 version is likely to make that grow. If I were a vendor of accounting software for mid-level businesses, I'd be worried.

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