

BRIEF

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Macromedia Puts Its Money Where Its Mouth Is

Since the launch of its MX family of products, Macromedia has talked a good game about improving user experience with X Internet apps. The new MX 2004 suite shows that the vendor isn't kidding around.

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In 2002, Macromedia launched the MX suite of tools -- including Dreamweaver, Flash, FreeHand, ColdFusion, and Fireworks -- to simplify Web application development. Last week, the vendor announced the next generation of the MX product line. What's the big deal?

- **Tool improvements for loyal fans.** Dreamweaver MX 2004 sports enhanced support for Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), secure FTP, dynamic cross-browser validation, and common server technologies like PHP and ASP.NET. Fireworks boasts improved performance and tighter integration with other MX products for better workflow management. The new Flash MX Professional 2004 edition supports direct video exporting with popular third-party video editing tools like Avid Xpress/Media Composer, Apple Final Cut Pro, and Anystream Agility -- and advanced device simulation capabilities for mobile app deployment.
- **New Flash appeal for doubting developers.** Macromedia has struggled to convince traditional developers that it understands their needs. But the new Flash MX Professional 2004 edition delivers an interface they'll like. This suite includes a forms-based development environment that will be more accessible than Macromedia's timeline metaphor for programmers accustomed to tools like Visual Basic. Rounding out the focus on business app development, the new product supports ActionScript 2.0 and SOAP for improved data control and connectivity.
- **Enhanced Flash player for the masses.** The new client provides full frame rate and progressive downloading for improved video capabilities. For business apps, Macromedia focused its efforts on improving the client's handling of data-intensive functions -- such as filling arrays -- and streamlining integration with legacy systems through support for SOAP. And for everyone, the client's

runtime performance has improved substantially -- beta test participants have reported as much as a twofold increase across a broad set of functions.

THIS IS A SHREWD RELEASE

Product announcements come and go, but Forrester believes that this one is significant.

- **The price is right.** Once shunned by enterprise buyers itching to fork over six figures for a solution, Macromedia's modest prices sound very attractive in this market. Even the top-of-the-line professional version starts at \$999 for new users -- a low risk investment for site owners eager to push beyond the page metaphor.
- **The improvements are promising.** Macromedia has a long tradition of steering product development via customer feedback and user research -- this release is no exception. Addressing three concerns that have hindered adoption in the past two years -- insufficient data connectivity, the timeline development environment, and uncertain client performance for data-intensive apps -- MX 2004 marks a big step forward in giving the market what it wants.
- **Awareness is growing.** Recently, several popular (and successful) apps have launched featuring advanced interactivity built on Flash -- miniusa.com and Yankee Candle's configurator chief among them. The release of the new MX product family is well-timed to take advantage of the market's growing awareness that page-based interactions have never looked more dated.

TAKE MX 2004 FOR A TEST DRIVE

Site owners should add MX 2004 to their arsenal of tools.

- **Pick frequently used, complex interactions.** Although any page can be made more attractive in Flash, that's not where end users will see the difference. Instead, teams should target common interactions that require complex calculations and product assembly. Lengthy checkout processes and product configurators are strong candidates.
- **Mock up an ideal solution.** To break out of the HTML UI paradigm, design teams should mock up cheap and quick paper prototypes of an ideal implementation -- without regard to technical restrictions. Next step: walk real users through the paper version to gauge success.

- **Dust off GUI standards.** MX 2004 ships with MX Elements and Halo, a collection of interface building blocks for rich Net apps. But these helpful components won't be enough. To avoid wasting time, teams should refamiliarize themselves with Microsoft and Apple GUI standards. For example, there's no use wasting time conjuring a new convention for mutually exclusive choices when radio buttons will do.