

Using Speech

Keeping The Consumer In Mind

by Robin Springer

QPointer Suite, a speech-recognition product offering dictation as well as mouse-less computer operation, is the creation of a company with a novel business strategy: to create a flawless assistive technology (AT) product for the disability market before branching into the mainstream arena.

The company, Commodo Inc., founded in 1999 in Israel and establishing its headquarters in the U.S. in the spring of 2002, currently is comprised of 13 employees both in the United States and Israel.

While on the surface, Commodo's product, QPointer, is another, "so what else is new" speech recognition product, upon investigation, it is much more. Many people who are familiar with speech-recognition products such as Dragon NaturallySpeaking and IBM ViaVoice have asked why anyone would even consider purchasing a product like QPointer. These critics, considering only the benefits of dictation, are unaware of the value of command and control functionality to the disabled consumer.

As is obvious on first use of QPointer, it was never intended to be, nor does it consider itself to be, a competitor of Dragon or even the IBM ViaVoice product line. Yizhar Hon, director of sales and marketing at Commodo explains, "there is some overlap but not competition (between QPointer and Dragon or IBM)..."

With recognition rates near 94%, Hon candidly agrees that Dragon currently has better dictation capabilities, but Dragon's command and control, navigation and drag-and-drop features are not as robust or versatile as those of QPointer. And, he continues, the IBM products

have never been much of a contender in the disability arena.

As one who is an expert in use of the Dragon product line, the differences in QPointer are apparent in minutes. For someone who wants 100% hands-free computer access, the ideal product would be a solution that encompassed a voice engine that is as good as NaturallySpeaking with QPointer's command and control functionality. Hon agrees that, when that happens, Dragon will be considered competition for QPointer.

Sold in the retail channel, Commodo reports more than 1100 individual sales of QPointer Suite in the United States since the product was released in May 2002. Another unique aspect to the product is that each retail unit includes up to five licenses for one person. The program requires a product key for installation necessitating users to call the manufacturer to obtain unique keys for installation on additional systems. Multiple users can be created on individual machines.

An entry-level product comprised of QPointer Voice, which allows users to control the computer completely by voice, and QPointer Keyboard, a module that facilitates keyboard navigation by voice, the Suite offers mouse-less operation by voice, keyboard command, or in conjunction with the standard mouse and keyboard.

QPointer is an application-independent, command and control product, not a speech recognition engine. Therefore, although currently using the Microsoft speech engine, the program can be used on any speech recognition

engine and can be released in multiple languages, pending licensing with manufacturers of appropriate foreign language engines. The company currently is in talks with BaBel, the Belgian company that offers speech recognition capability in 12 European languages. Subsequent to such an agreement, users will be able to switch back and forth between more than one profile to dictate in multiple languages.

Because of its superior command and control capability, the product is well suited for integration into other technologies such as head pointing devices, environmental control, and educational software.

While the current Suite is considered a "low-end" version, the new product, targeted for Spring 2003 release will be "high-end", anticipated to include features such as vocabulary specialties, increased accuracy (at the 99% level), and extensive macro capabilities.

While it is common for companies that market speech-to-text solutions in the retail channel to begin by catering to the AT market, they traditionally shift gears mid-process, sacrificing crucial hands-free features to cater to the wider and more lucrative mainstream market.

Commodo has made a cognizant decision to maximize its product for the AT market and to stay in AT until the software evolves into a universally designed, disabled-friendly, able-bodied-acceptable product. Once they have mastered the total solution they will consider broadening their market to include those who simply want a productivity tool. How refreshing.



Robin Springer is president of Computer Talk, a consulting firm specializing in the design and implementation of speech recognition and other hands-free technology services. She can be reached at (888) 999-9161 or by e-mail at info@comptalk.com.