

A Modest Proposal

Whil Hentzen

Warning! The opinions in this column are specifically my own and do not reflect the views of Pinnacle Publishing, its staff, related personnel, or possibly anyone else in the Seattle area. But I suspect one or two of you out there might end up nodding in agreement.

Remember the olden days? Specifically, back in the late 1980s? Those were the days when companies worldwide were using dBASE III+ and IV, and a few daring souls, tired of their users whining about sluggish or unacceptable performance in their desktop database applications, resorted to a new tactic. They compiled the dBASE application with this new product from a tiny little company somewhere in the Midwest, and demonstrated the same functionality (and source code), albeit with better response time. Well, “better response time” might be understating the effect; socks were flying everywhere as a result of being blown off the users.

Of course, then MIS stepped in and ask “How’d you do that?” and, shyly (or, in some cases, boastfully) the developer would admit “I just compiled the finished application in FoxBASE.”

“Oh, we can’t have that! It’s not on the approved list!” MIS would roar. The user, on the other hand, ignored the argument, pleased as punch that they could finally get some decent performance out of the system, and, as you guessed, the developer ended up with another convert.

This scenario played out over and over, and with each repetition, the little company in the Midwest grew bigger, made more money, and released new, more popular, versions of its flagship product. Meanwhile, competitive releases of dBASE were increasingly bug-ridden and lost market share. Eventually, the largest desktop software manufacturer in the world bought Fox Software and dBASE, for all practical purposes, disappeared as a viable competitor.

Well, it’s been nearly a half-year since the recent hubbub from those industry rags arose, and let’s face it, FoxPro has been getting an unfair, undeserved bad rap in companies all over the world. People are shying away from the product on the basis of gossip and innuendo, completely ignoring the capabilities and functionality of the product. And it’s obvious that we’re not going to get the marketing support we need from Microsoft. The position of the entire FoxPro marketing team is embodied in the following quote: “It’s my job to promote FoxPro, but not at the expense of other Microsoft products.” I’ll discuss the fallacy in this point of view in a future article, but here and now let me make a modest proposal.

First, pick up a copy of Visual Basic, since that’s the tool of choice according to ’softies everywhere, and spend a bit of time with it. Get acquainted with the interface (guess what? The only learning curve you’ll have is to remember what you can’t do in VB that’s a piece of cake in VFP), and to learn how to access data (there are a half-dozen pretty good books out on this subject alone). By the time you’re done, you’ll have a better appreciation of just how good you have it with FoxPro, as well as realize that VB is a better tool for some types of applications. (Face it, even after my complaining about it back in Toronto in 1994, there are no good games written in FoxPro.)

Okay, now you’re ready. Pick out an application that requires a moderately-sized data set, say 250,000–500,000 records. Write it in both FoxPro and VB. Make sure the interface is reasonably similar, and that it hides which language you wrote the application in. Have a VB buddy of yours rip your VB code apart to make sure that it’s reasonably sound—that you didn’t commit the VB equivalent of doing a LOCATE without an appropriate index tag—and it’s time to visit some customers.

Show the VB version and demonstrate some cool features, how this works, what that does, and so on. Pull up some queries, enter a few records, run a report or two, get them comfortable that this is a reasonable VB application—one that they could expect from your typical VB developer. You might mention the amount of time it took to develop, by the way.

Then, shut it down, and pull up the FoxPro version. They’ll quickly notice the difference in performance, and you can probably squeeze in a mention of the percentage of development time it took. VB folks still aren’t quite up the curve on application frameworks, so they don’t benefit from the RAD philosophy that we have in FoxPro.

Well, now the tough part comes, or the easy part if you enjoy being a thorn in one’s side. Because now you’ll have to explain why the Microsoft marketing machine prefers to sell VB over FoxPro. And since there really isn’t any rational explanation, you’ll have to leave it to the customer to figure it out. “Let’s see, I can have this written in FoxPro, and it will cost me next to nothing for Microsoft products since you can deliver a standalone EXE, or I can do this in VB and it will take longer, have much poorer performance, but still cost me very little in software outlays, or I can do this in VB and SQL Server, and it will take longer, have acceptable performance, and I only have to spend *how much* for Microsoft software?”

This is called guerrilla marketing. It got us to where we are today, and before getting completely frustrated at the lack of support from Microsoft’s marketing machine, remember what we were told last year at Database World: “I expect you developers to market the product for us!”

Remember, this is just a modest proposal. But we've been doing this all summer, with some surprising results. And I swear I'm not making this up.