

Column: From Editor
Figures: NONE
File for Companion Disk: None

Time to Come Clean

Whil Hentzen

I guess one of the perks of this job – editor of FoxTalk – is that people begin to think that you know what you’re doing. And so they ask you for advice. Another aspect of this is that people watch and take cues from your actions as well.

A couple of people have also asked me about this curious listing they’ve seen on Amazon.com – Access 2000 Programming from the Ground Up – with my name attached as author. Yeah, it’s true; I’ve spent last fall and this winter writing this book – all by my very lonesome. And it’s been posited here and there that I’ve turned “to the dark side”. And they’re wondering if maybe there’s something in Access 2000 that means they should be using it.

But I can see that as the Access 2000 book pushes George and Monica out of the top spots on the NY Times best seller list, more and more people will wonder. I certainly wouldn’t want you to consider including Access as a potential development tool just because you heard a rumour. So let me explain.

I was approached by a friend in the publishing biz to do this book, even though I’d never used Access for more than some casual interactive use before. Silly me. I said yes. The primary driving force was to be forced to learn about this tool so that I could talk intelligently about it when asked by customers. Instead of a vague “roll your eyes” when they mention Access, I could then explain what the specific technical issues were that precluded my use of Access as a development tool.

There was also a personal reason. My dad recently bought his first computer, and one of the reasons was to put together a database for the classic car club he belongs to. Would you recommend Visual FoxPro to your dad for this type of app? Neither would I. So the sample application I did in the Access book was a rough prototype of this car club database. How many of you would jump at the chance to write a book for your old man? I figured this was a once in a lifetime chance, and I couldn’t turn it down.

And, of course, there’s the money! Oh, say it with me – the money! Show me the money! I can only echo Getty Lee (lead vocalist for Rush) who responded, after collaborating with the McKenzie Brothers (“I’m Bob, and that’s my brother Doug”) on the late ‘80’s hit, “Take-Off”: “Glad to do it, guys. And, hey, ten dollars *is* ten dollars!”

Seriously, only an idiot takes on a computer book project because they think they’ll make any real money. The going royalty rate for commercial books these days is perhaps \$2 a book. How many books would you have to sell in order to make up for the billable time lost when you spent 800 – 1,000 hours writing? So, as an aside, if you’re thinking about writing, write for the glory. Write for the inner peace. Write to meet members of the opposite sex. Write because it feels so good when you stop. Don’t try it for the money.

But have I turned to the dark side?

Nope. Up above, I said “I certainly wouldn’t want you to consider including Access as a potential development tool just because you heard a rumour.” I can be a bit more concise. “I certainly wouldn’t want you to consider including Access as a potential development tool.” Period.

I still think Fox is the absolute best tool for doing custom development, and all of my custom work is still either pure Fox or Fox with a SQL Server back end. I used to diss Access just cuz it was in style for Fox developers to do so. Now my disdain is backed by nine months of using the tool. Mind you - it’s not a bad tool. There are some things that I would really like to see in VFP. But it’s also got some limitations. More importantly, it just doesn’t suit my personality. That’s not a judgment regarding the quality of the tool. I’ve developed a respect for the Access backers in our Visual Studio Developer’s Group – I just prefer something different. Period.

What does this mean for you and your plans? Should you learn Access? After seeing how it fits with VBA, SQL Server 7.0, and the rest of the Microsoft suite, I’d say no. I hope they don’t ask me to do an Access 2002 book, because I don’t want to. And I’m not really looking forward to getting those phone calls from my dad about “I couldn’t find out how to do X in your book.” Hey, Dad, now that you’ve learned the basics, pick up a book by Ken Getz or Paul Litwin. They know Access inside and out, and make it jump through hoops.

But if you've got to add another tool to your repertoire, make it Visual Basic, or Delphi. I think a lot of developers used to the dot prompt and command window aren't going to be happy in Access.