

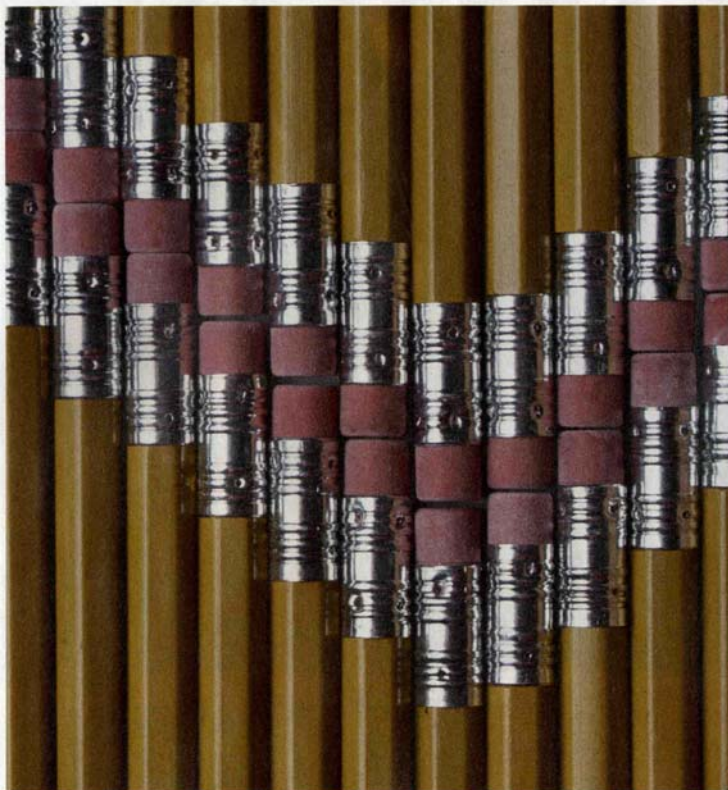
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Education

SPECIAL REPORT

Tools of the trade

Simon Quicke identifies the technologies that resellers would do well to focus on in the ever-changing education market



The education market is one of those key verticals that channel players aspire to work in because the business can be steady and the relationship a positive experience.

The reason schools and colleges are such good places to target is not only because they continue to embrace technology as a teaching aid but also because the needs of tech-savvy students are opening up different management challenges.

At the BETT Show in January, along with the numerous stands showing off the audio-visual equipment that has become synonymous with the classroom, there were indications that the pressure was on educational institutions to start working harder with IT.

The Web 2.0 revolution has been barely more

than a breaker on the corporate beach, but in the world of teenagers it has been a tsunami, changing the way they communicate and forcing schools and colleges to take notice.

The immediate demands are for out-of-hours networks allowing students to upload homework and download coursework, greater calls for one laptop per child and increasing pressure on teachers to use tools or work closer with resellers to help them get more out of their technology.

Projectors and whiteboards

The technology that first appeared in classrooms was heavily supported by the government, which ploughed in millions of pounds of investment to make sure that Britain's classrooms were equipped with the tools to help our children compete and learn smarter.

Then inevitably the money was stopped and the doubters in the industry voiced fears that the orders would dry up. But that did not happen because the technology had proved itself and classrooms either continued to need one or schools started upgrading. Part of the reason for the need to upgrade is that technology does not stay still, with whiteboards having become more interactive and projectors continuing to improve in quality.

Darren Lewitt, divisional director at Midwich, believes that although the market for interactive whiteboards is almost at saturation point, the market for replacement projectors and lamps is burgeoning.

According to Lewitt, schools are packed with old SVGA projectors that will need replacement lamps and, inevitably, replacing with a new one. He cites short throw projectors and also digital visualisers as good prospects for the future.

"We have signed an exclusive deal with Lumens to distribute its digital visualisers and the feedback we have received so far has been extremely positive. We believe that visualisers will eventually replace the traditional overhead projection unit in schools, colleges and universities and are actively looking for reseller partners to sell this new technology," he says.

"We have also recently launched a new breed of super close projector from 3M that eliminates the health and safety issues associated with projector glare and stock a variety of orange-coloured security projectors that have been a huge hit in security-conscious schools," he adds.

Software

One of the more interesting developments at BETT was the number of innovations in software that would traditionally have been confined to the back office.

Microsoft took a large stand at the show to display its products, but other software companies were also present and showed some of the initial results of a Web 2.0 way of thinking.

On the FileMaker stand, UK country manager Tony Speakman was able to show off some applications that had been developed to run with its database package which had been the brainchild of teachers and students.

The vendor recently commissioned a report — *Making ICT Work for Schools and Colleges* — which enabled it to illustrate with case studies how traditional back office software was becoming a tool with uses beyond the school office.

The other pressure on higher education is the wide disparity of students who might not only be connecting from a wide area but could be visiting a campus spread over several locations. ▶

◀ "All the students need is a PC and a browser and it is much better for the education market to remain focused on what it does best and host the applications," says Craig Sullivan, vice-president of international products at NetSuite.

He adds that even using a secure hosted system to allow students to check marks and exam results would potentially remove the need to post the details, which could save money and reduce the risk of some students not getting their results at the same time.

Security

There are currently moves to house all hardware designated for school use in orange casing to make it less attractive to thieves as it would be harder to sell on, and this builds on the locks, cages and other hardware security solutions already on the market.

But there are growing fears that a lack of awareness about the threats that would be targeted at a fat pipe in a school with broadband capability means these could be slipping under the radar.

Ian Kilpatrick, chairman of Wick Hill, believes resellers have a crucial role to play in helping schools protect their data, as well as extending it to students and teachers to help foster learning out of hours.

Part of the problem, particularly in higher education establishments, is that they have to provide high-bandwidth broadband that is often

on 24/7 and is unprotected. With more students choosing to upload and interact with course material in the evening or at the weekend there is a growing requirement for greater control.

"We are putting SSL [secure sockets layer] devices in which allow people to connect remotely and there are ways of also offering device and PC protection, for instance preinstalled on a USB stick, that can be sold to the students to protect their equipment," Kilpatrick says.

He adds that ironically for a profession that is all about teaching, there is a lack of awareness and a need for education to get the security message across.

Mobile hardware

Plenty of headlines have been grabbed by the battle of words between the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Nicholas Negroponte and Intel over the race to gain market share in providing low-cost laptops to children in the Third World.

Closer to home the competition is just as intense but is about more than just cost. There is a form factor battle going on, with manufacturers trying to come to the market from different angles.

Samsung is the latest to knock on the education market's door with a twist on the laptop story in its small handheld device, an Ultra-Mobile PC (UMPC) which offers the

traditional functions of a laptop and the mobile features of a PDA. Ginesh Chaud, product manager for its mobile computing division, describes it as "a happy hybrid".

"We have seen growth in the education sector and have got several local authorities running trials. The Schools for the Future programme is a serious investment by the government and there has been something like £2.5bn put aside for it, and part of it is about getting handheld learning devices," he says.

The education market has numerous needs, therefore there are plenty of routes into it for resellers

Chaud adds that it is beneficial for children because it gives them more freedom as well as a chance to use the latest applications and interact with the technology.

Elsewhere the efforts are going into producing equipment with longer battery life and addressing some of the popular education requirements such as rugged casing.

Learning the lesson

But whatever the product, ultimately the lesson to learn from the education market is that it has numerous needs, therefore there are plenty of routes into it for resellers. But those that are successful will not just have crossed the t's and dotted the i's on the accreditation and tendering process required, they will also have understood the issues schools are up against.

The current generation of school children is surrounded by more multimedia than any before it. The way young people communicate, learn and expect to receive information has changed. Resellers targeting this sector need to be aware of the changing landscape and the different needs the Web 2.0 generation will have and sell the right products and services to support those changes. ■

Beyond the classroom

Part of the changes in schools are coming from the students that have grown up surrounded by technology with consoles, laptops and digital television. FileMaker has discovered that given the chance to play with the technology, it is the children who are capable of surprising the adults.

In its recent study, *Making ICT Work for Schools and Colleges*, the software vendor was able to help students access a database that would store their work, lessons and communal resources from field trips.

The pressure on schools is to provide more remote access and the tools that allow children to work beyond the classroom. Ginesh Chaud, product manager for the mobile computing division at Samsung, says schools are looking for a fully functional product that is portable and comes in at the right price point, adding that those people making the purchasing decisions in local authorities are very switched on to the need to increase mobility.