

A Pilot in Your Palm

by Scott Shelley

In my constant search for ways to make myself more efficient and better organized, none of the electronic address books I have tried have come close to the Palm Pilot Professional I recently purchased.

The Pilot (\$350, <http://palmpilot.3com.com>) is an amazing little piece of equipment. And I mean "little" — it literally fits in the palm of my hand. Most of the work area is a back-lit LCD screen with a section at the bottom for writing with a built-in stylus. The Pilot Professional also comes with a cradle that attaches to the serial port of your computer and allows for synchronization, or a "HotSync," between the two (see Figure 1). Synchronizing the information between your computer and your Pilot is seamless and simple. All you need to do after a day in the field is drop the Pilot in its cradle, push the HotSync button, and watch it work. The

whole process of transferring new names and addresses or notes taken in the field from the Pilot to the desktop computer takes about one minute. The same process is also used to transfer applications to the Pilot from your computer.

An optional modem attaches directly to the bottom of the Pilot; at 14,000 bps, it's slow by today's standards, but it's plenty fast for sending or receiving e-mail, or for performing a "HotSync" by telephone.

Graffiti

The primary method for entering text and numbers into the system is through *Graffiti* handwriting software. It takes some time to learn to draw the stylized alphabet *Graffiti* employs, but most of the characters resemble ordinary block printing (Figure 2). I must admit that I was skeptical at first, since handwriting recognition software has generally not

lived up to its billing, but in this case it works. I was pretty proficient with *Graffiti* after playing with it off and on for about three days. Within a week, I could write almost as fast as I usually do.

Applications

The Pilot Professional comes with a set of applications, including Address Book, To Do List, Memo Pad, and an expense-tracking program. The memo and expense applications require that you have MS Word and Excel on your desktop if you want to synchronize data, and the e-mail application requires a MAPI or VIM e-mail system, such as MS Mail, Lotus cc:Mail, or Eudora. My one complaint about the Pilot Professional is that I had to figure out some workarounds to use these features because I use different desktop software.

Third-party software. The Pilot's enthusiastic following includes many



Figure 1. A serial-port cradle allows for the transfer of applications between the Palm Pilot Professional and a desktop PC. The cradle also updates or synchronizes software on the PC with data gathered in the field using the Pilot.



Figure 2. Using a built-in stylus, users write directly on the Palm Pilot's LCD display screen. The stylized alphabet required by the *Graffiti* handwriting software is easy to learn because it resembles block printing characters.




Figure 3. Using a Palm Pilot equipped with an optional modem and third-party software called *HandStamp Pro*, users can send faxes and e-mail and make Internet connections.

software developers. In one hour on the Internet, I found numerous links to sites where I could purchase software, templates, and files, along with all sorts of hardware upgrades.

The first product I downloaded was the free ACT! link from Symantec, so I could share contact names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses between my Pilot and my computer. Links are also available for ECCO, Goldmine, and Ascend97; more companies are coming out with software links to the Pilot all the time.

Next, I downloaded a product called HandStamp Pro (\$59 from Smartcode Software), an Internet e-mail package that sends and receives messages directly without a link or synchronization through your desktop computer (Figure 3, previous page). Once I entered the address of my Internet Service Provider and attached the modem, I was sending and receiving e-mail from anywhere with a phone line available.



The screenshot shows a handheld device screen with a database application titled "DB: Assignments". It displays a table with three columns: "Project", "Date", and "Finished". The table contains seven rows of data. At the bottom of the screen, there are five buttons: "Done", "Add", "Find", "+", and "Del".

Project	Date	Finished
Alpha	8/19/97	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Beta	7/28/97	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Delta	8/23/97	<input type="checkbox"/>
Epsilon	10/8/97	<input type="checkbox"/>
Eta	4/9/97	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Gamma		<input type="checkbox"/>
Iota	8/21/97	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Theta	5/16/97	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Zeta	1/27/97	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Figure 4. With database software called Jfile, you can use the Palm Pilot to create customized checklists for site surveys, punchlists, and other site-management information.

Smartcode also has software that will send faxes from the Pilot.

The next product I found is a password-protected database called Jfile (\$19 from Land-J Technologies). In no

time, I was using Jfile's pop-up lists and check boxes to track my punchlists for various jobs, then exporting them to my PC for further sorting (Figure 4). I was also able to use pop-up menus to create checklists for pre-estimate site surveys, using categories such as site access, finishes, existing framing, and so on.

I also downloaded a demo of a product called Punch List from Strata Systems. The developer says that you can use Punch List to take notes in the field, then synchronize with the PC in the office at the end of the day. You can then fax lists of incomplete tasks or other information to your subcontractors. The demo looked promising, and I plan to do a review of this product once I receive the full software package.



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