

Mac is a success. Despite being released halfway through the month, it was the second-best-selling computer for August 1998. And it is still selling well. In retrospect, this may not seem surprising. iMac had nearly everything going for it—speed, simplicity, price, industrial design, Mac OS, and \$100 million of advertising. Still, I am amazed and thankful that the iMac launch actually worked, because on August 15th there were three things that worried me—any one of which could have made iMac a dismal failure: ‘How will the media react?’ ‘Will iMac’s many omissions deter customers?’ and ‘Even if it’s successful, will Apple be able to meet demand?’

The most memorable part of the November ’97 “event” where Apple introduced the Power Mac G3’s was Steve Job’s somewhat awkward line: “In order for Apple to succeed, we have to execute ourselves.” Well, he almost shot himself in the foot when he said that, but the sentiment was correct. Over the years, Apple has built many great products that never quite “made it” because Apple didn’t stick by them long enough or market them strongly enough. With iMac Apple went all-or-nothing, they got a little bit lucky, and thankfully, everything seems to have worked out.

## Apple Was Lucky

iMac won the most important battle of all: the battle of perception. Maybe, you could argue, Apple created its own luck through the iMac advertising campaign. Perhaps the media gave iMac so much press because the only story that sells better than a disaster story is a comeback story. Still, I think Apple got lucky. The media didn’t rave about iMac, but almost every article on it gave a mixed review, and that’s a lot better than Apple products have been receiving in the past. In fact, the controversy and differences of opinion are what kept it in the news for so long.

An MSNBC reporter complained that essentials like a floppy drive cost extra. iMac, he wrote, wouldn’t be a real computer until it came with a real keyboard and mouse. It’s true that the keyboard and mouse are different in more ways than looks. The keyboard has smallish function keys, small arrow keys that make gameplaying in iMac’s target home market difficult, and a non-standard page-up/page-down layout. Nevertheless, most articles pointed out that iMac’s keyboard and mouse are among the most comfortable available, neglecting to mention their short-comings. After years of conditioning from reading anti-Apple stories, this is about the most I could hope for.

## Apple Messed Up

Apple messed up big time. I'm not talking about the iMac's controversial casing, color, expandability (or lack thereof), or even its lack of a floppy drive. Apple's big mistake—that could have been a fatal flaw—was not taking the necessary steps to make sure iMac's apparent flaws were plugged by the August 15th release date.

Although my initial reaction was that Apple was crazy for not including a floppy drive with iMac—after all, Apple was the company to standardize the 3.5" floppy—I no longer see that as a problem. No doubt Apple's market research people are good at what they do and determined that most people don't use their floppy drives. I know I don't much anymore. So why bloat the case and charge customers for a feature they are unlikely to use?

That's a fine philosophy, except that when iMac was released, there were no external floppy drives to be bought. No SuperDisk drives, Zips, or SparQs either. It's one thing to design a computer without a floppy disk drive; it's quite another to sell a computer that is incapable of connecting to any removable storage solution until a month after its release date. Depending on public reaction, this could have permanently doomed iMac.

Apple should have done whatever it took, from developing its own solutions in-house to providing the requisite third-parties NDA'd information in April to make sure that a full line of removable media drives and USB to Serial/ADB/SCSI adapters were available on iMac's launch date—preferably available from the Apple Store and displayed right next to iMac at CompUSA. No iMac user should have to trek to Farallon's Web site, figure out that an iPrint is what they need to connect a StyleWriter to an iMac, then read that the iPrint isn't yet available. There's no telling how many potential buyers were forever turned away from iMac by its initial image of a completely closed design and lack of peripherals.

And what was Apple thinking when they decided to bundle two of the most un-Mac-like programs with iMac? Cool as they are, MetaTools' Kai's PhotoSoap offers nothing in the way of a traditional Mac user experience, and the first-person shooter MDK has the feel of a clunky DOS port. Its key configuration panel is among the worst I've seen anywhere. You'd think Apple could have arranged to bundle a few distinctly Mac games like Bungie's Marathon Trilogy or some of the Ambrosia or C & G classics. (For what it's worth, the included Nanosaur game fits this description.) Kudos to Apple on bundling AppleWorks instead of Office 98, though. AppleWorks feels so much like what a Mac program should be; it's great.

## But It All Worked Out

Still, Apple's strong media presence and the willingness of customers to think differently made iMac a success. To see just how amazing and important an accomplishment this was, consider:

Rather than being seen as a cost-cutting measure, iMac's lack of SCSI, standard Mac serial ports, and a floppy drive was seen as revolutionary. One article went so far as to complain that PC's with USB also have standard PC ports. Several thought not having a floppy drive was a great feature because it made it easier to control what got onto—and off of—the computer. No worries about students bringing viruses to school with them or government employees taking home sensitive information. Who wants backwards compatibility when you can get rid of it and call your product revolutionary?

Apple was able to successfully convince many people that iMac's many omissions were features. Namely, the omissions were aimed at making iMac as simple as possible. Perhaps "simple" has become the new marketpeak for "not expandable." Truthfully, I don't know what to make of this. Was Apple finally able to break the public's obsession with feature checklists? I hope so. Or did it win them over with the iMac's style? Probably.

iMac represents Apple's first serious attempt in a long time to differentiate its products from the competition in terms of industrial design—and then make sure the media hear about it. Just look at its series of "Chic. Not Geek." and "Beige-Free Zone" digs against the PC industry. Ask yourself how many people knew what color "Bondi" was five months ago. The survey that ran in ATPM 4.08 shows the power of Apple's marketing engine.

#### ATPM Readers' Favorite Colors

Although more than half of those who voted for Bondi Blue as their favorite color didn't know its correct name ("iMac blue" and "teal like the iMac" were common answers), that didn't stop it from taking a second-place to plain old generic blue, beating out such classics and red, green, and EvangeLista blood. (Disappointingly, not one person chose "ATPM Blue" as their favorite color. Maybe we need to advertise a bit more.)

Besides what it says about Apple, iMac's success also suggests that there is hope for the Mac platform winning PC converts. I don't know which we have to thank for PC users converting to iMac: its jaw-dropping appearance, or the fact that Apple is finally buying advertisements where non-Mac users will see them.

## What iMac Is

It seems that Steve Jobs can sell sugared water and change the world at the same time. This is why I think it would be interesting to see how well iMac could do without its Bondi case. In many ways iMac differs little from the 5x00 all-in-one Macs that Apple has been selling to education customers for several years now. In fact, the 5x00 series bests iMac in some important areas. It has a pivot-mounted monitor, SCSI, an optional TV tuner, Mac serial ports, and, of course, a floppy drive. Granted, its monitor isn't as nice as iMac's, and it's a

little bigger, but suppose Apple had modified the 5x00 to give it a better monitor, USB, and a G3 processor, and called that iMac? With full peripheral backward compatibility and a built-in floppy drive, there would have been virtually nothing for critics to complain about. And that would have made for boring newspaper and magazine articles.

I don't think even a \$100 million advertising campaign could make such a machine sell as well as iMac has. Probably, Apple would be seen as playing catch-up with the likes of Dell and Compaq. Like it or not, the Bondi blue serves a purpose. Without it, no one would be touting the built-in 100Base-T Ethernet as a signal that the network age is upon us—because no one would have taken notice of iMac.

## The Future

Whether or not you happen to like iMac, you have to agree that it was just the kind of home run Apple needed to win back some serious mind share. Apple hasn't said much about its future products, but all indications are that the company just might have a few more home runs lined up. Soon, we'll have a new line of "Pro" Macs that weren't based on a motherboard originally designed for the low-end. And sometime next year we'll finally see the debut of iMac's counterpart—the consumer portable.

But we shouldn't let this talk of next year's hardware overshadow the fact that Apple has two major software releases scheduled for delivery this fall—Mac OS 8.5 and Mac OS X Server. (Please think of a better name, Apple!) Apple hasn't quite kept to its target yearly schedule—Mac OS 8 was released in July and 8.5 looks to be released 14 months after that—but it is much better than the company has done in the past and certainly much better than Microsoft's schedule for Windows releases.

To me, OS 8.5 is a much more important update than 8.0. Though it still does not offer all the features originally promised for Copland, OS 8.5 adds a lot of polish to 8.0's rough edges. At last, AppleScript will be native, QuickDraw will be faster, folder windows will have icon proxies, and there will be an application dock—just to name a few of the things took forward to.

Personally, I'm waiting for Mac OS X Server (which will include OS 8.5 in the Blue Box). For all intents and purposes, OS X Server is the Rhapsody Unified that the Amelio administration promised us. The fact that OS X and Carbon are on tap for next year in no way diminishes the importance of OS X Server—despite what you might think from the rumblings, or lack thereof, about OS X Server from Cupertino. Not only does the Blue Box reboot more quickly after a crash than Mac OS 8.x, but there are plenty of good Yellow Box applications from the days of NeXT. I can't wait to try out Mesa as an alternative to Excel 98. And it's always handy to be able to run UNIX programs now and then.

In short, I haven't been so optimistic about Apple's future in a long time. Apple has been on the recovery path for a while, since Dr. Amelio's tenure, in my opinion. But even with the return of Steve Jobs, the press, and people in general, I think, needed a dramatic way to recognize that Apple once again had a viable future. Someone at Apple apparently realized this, for nearly everything about iMac seems designed to say, "Hey, Apple's back!" And, it worked. But the best part is that we ain't seen nothin' yet.

