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## **MacWorld shows new convention center, Apple need a boost**

**By Al Gordon**

*Columnist*

Suppose you had an Apple Computer trade show and Apple wasn't there?

You pretty much would have last week's MacWorld Boston 2004 -- and a fair number of underwhelmed attendees. In an entirely random and unscientific sampling of people attending the event at the new Boston Convention & Exhibition Center, one of the kindest comments was "small." Others used another "s" word that good taste precludes me from using here.

Crowds could not fairly be called sparse but were far from wall-to-wall, and the exhibits failed to fill up the space allotted for the show, which in turn was only a third of the mammoth exhibition hall. Major exhibitors -- emphasis on major, as in companies with substantial share of the Mac market -- were in short supply.

As of press time, a spokesperson for the trade show's organizer, Framingham-based IDG Inc., had not responded to a request for a final attendance tally. Their target of 10,000 was a far cry from 50,000-plus claimed for the last Boston MacWorld seven years ago. On the other hand, no one was screaming for the show to go back to New York City, its venue for the last seven years. Both exhibitors and attendees said that the event was dying in the Big Apple.

It is, of course, an ill wind that blows no one much good. A few companies that did show up managed to come away with "best of show" prizes for products that might otherwise have been lost in the shuffle. The Massachusetts Convention Center Authority had the opportunity to work out the bugs in the new center without having to

deal with overflow crowds. And I get to write about the Big Picture on Apple and the Convention Center.

The big Apple news during the show wasn't made at the show but at corporate headquarters in Cupertino, Calif., where the company announced its third-quarter revenues increased 30 percent to the highest level in eight years. Equally important, although sales of the iPod music player continue to lead the way in the company's financial results, shipments and revenues from Mac computers also were up. Thus, the current theorizing about Apple becoming primarily an entertainment company and the obituaries for the Mac can be deferred for a while longer.

Nevertheless, this remains a critical juncture in Apple's history. The company's market share of personal computer sales has shrunk to the low single digits. Apple needs to stabilize the Mac's market position before support for the platform collapses. The fact is that the surge in graphics and multimedia computer uses -- for everything from corporate communications to family digital photos and movies -- are on the upswing now, and these are core Apple capabilities. If the company cannot increase sales now, it never may do so.

Another important decision on Apple's plate is whether to license its FairPlay digital rights management technology -- the software that controls when and how users can play downloaded music. Apple does have a dominant market share of both music downloads and music players (iPod) and would like to keep FairPlay proprietary. But in doing so, Apple runs the risk that someone else -- i.e., Microsoft -- will set the industry standard format instead.

As for the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center -- "BCEC" on highway signboards, just in case you needed to learn another acronym -- the operative word is "massive." Forget the comparisons to football fields and 747 hangers; the key measure is that it is equal to roughly three Hynes Convention Centers and that you can put 10,000 people in it and have it look like a ghost town.

Parking needs to be better. Signage in the area needs to be better. The staff needs to have more events under its belt. But the center successfully handled two events at once last week: MacWorld and a regional conference for SAP, a corporate software maker, and it can fairly be described as having made a good start.

What the center really needs most is for the convention business to pick up again. Trade shows and meeting are very much tied to economic cycles, and as the economy picks up, so does the number and size of trade shows. If the Boston area escapes from the Democratic National Convention with anything resembling a reputation for being a good host city, the future of the convention center should look pretty bright.

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