Simply an e-mail interface

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Resumo:
Four commercial e-mail packages designed to support corporate Simple Message Transfer Protocol (SMTP) standards are compared. Since these products are merely front-ends for SMPT server systems, they afford corporate users flexibility in designing e-mail transportation infrastructures. Products were tested in terms of installation and configuration, messaging functionality, documentation, technical support and pricing. The highest rating, a 7.3, was awarded to the $89 Eudora Pro 2.0, which rated very good in the three areas of installation, message creation and messaging. In addition, the Qualcomm package earned a superior rating in customer support. The $95 Z-Mail 4.0 scored 6.6; it offers a powerful scripting language for creating an e-mail system and includes a range of helpful features. The SuperTCP Suite 96, which is combined with an Internet package for $125, earned a score of 5.8, while the $69 Pronto Mail 2.01 was rated unacceptable in documentation and poor in technical support for a low score of 5.2.

Texto completo:
COMPARED:

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Eudora Pro 2.0 Qualcomm Inc.

Pronto Mail 2.01 CommTouch Software Inc.

SuperTCP Suite 96 Frontier Technologies Corp.

Z-Mail 4.0 NCD Software Corp.
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Looking for an e-mail package? If you've got an SMTP infrastructure in place, you might want to consider the latest crop of SMTP e-mail front ends -- they're every bit as pleasing as a proprietary PC e-mail system.

Proprietary PC e-mail systems are de rigueur among corporate LANs. Without a doubt, products such as Lotus Development Corp.'s cc:Mail and Microsoft Corp.'s Mail are very successful, but buying into them comes at a significant price. In particular, proprietary systems effectively lock users into a given product because there are few practical ways to migrate from one proprietary solution to another. As companies moved to integrate their PCs with bigger systems, more problems emerged. With no hope of actually integrating popular PC e-mail systems with Unix mail and other platforms, IS managers found themselves supporting (at least) two largely independent systems grafted together with Simple Message Transfer Protocol (SMTP), X.400, or other e-mail gateways. Thanks to a ground swell of SMTP-based products, from new Windows NT mail hosts to full-featured clients for almost every platform, open standards-based e-mail is a reality on PC LANs.

We've rounded up the cream of the commercial SMTP front-end crop: Qualcomm Inc.'s Eudora Pro 2.0, CommTouch Software's Pronto Mail 2.01, NCD Technologies Inc.'s Z-Mail 4.0, and the e-mail software bundled in Frontier Technologies' SuperTCP Suite 96. Any of these products can easily handle basic e-mail chores, but we've tested them as serious corporate tools: How powerful is their rule-based processing? Can their message storage systems organize the traffic that busy offices generate?

KEEP IT SIMPLE. The Internet is the medium for transferring messages between organizations and far-off enterprises. It's not difficult to understand why: By simply connecting your network to one outside service or Internet service provider (ISP), you can message anyone, anywhere in the world. To do so, the Internet relies heavily on SMTP and Multipurpose Internet Mail Extensions (MIME). In short, if you use the Internet as a messaging vehicle, you're bound to run into SMTP somewhere along the line.

It wasn't always this way. SMTP and its companion standards are replacing standards such as X.400. SMTP is often maligned because it doesn't solve the multitude of important issues that X.400 does: security (at least a framework for it), binary messages and attachments, directory services, and receipt notification. But the reality is, due to their popularity, SMTP and MIME are becoming the de facto standard for interorganization message traffic.

Obviously, there is no need to scrap your existing LAN e-mail system to connect your enterprise to the Internet. Every major PC e-mail platform supports at least one SMTP gateway. If you've invested heavily in one of these systems, a gateway is bound to be the best solution. But if you're at a point to deploy or significantly change an e-mail platform, these SMTP front ends may be the best long-term solution.

IT'S JUST AN E-MAIL READER. The fundamental limitation of all SMTP e-mail front ends is actually one of the greatest strengths. Unlike traditional PC e-mail products that include everything you need to connect e-mail clients, these products are simply front ends. They assume that there is some collection of SMTP servers shuffling messages around in the background. As partial solutions, these products allow you to create your own e-mail transportation infrastructure that is completely independent of your choice of front end -- a classic best-of-breed solution. By decoupling the front end from the transport system, you can choose to tap one of the recently introduced NT SMTP servers, leverage a long-established Unix mail infrastructure, or rely on an independent ISP or other third party to do administration -- or any combination of these solutions.

With an SMTP infrastructure in place, you can have wildly disparate workstations all interacting with the same messaging backbone.

For convenience's sake, we refer to this group of products as SMTP front ends, but SMTP is only part of the mail system. All of these products tie at least three Internet Engineering Task Force standards together: SMTP, POP3, and MIME.

SMTP is just what it claims to be: a message-transport protocol. It doesn't concern itself with message formats, directory structures, and similar concerns. It allows a basically arbitrary message format to move from a sender to a recipient through any number of intermediate servers and returns a notification to the sender if something goes awry. You're free to set up the SMTP message routing within your organization any way you want. Of course, with any SMTP system in place, the Internet is just one router hop away.

As a message transport, however, SMTP puts one irritating and surprisingly difficult-to-solve limitation on e-mail data: The message must be ASCII text. If you're just sending a quick text message to someone, SMTP's restriction isn't a problem. For a message that contains more than simple text, it's not difficult to translate a binary file into the ASCII character set. There are lots of utilities to encode a file before transmission and decode it on arrival: UUencode (presumably named after the raft of Unix-to-Unix utilities with the UU preference), Base 64, and BinHex are the most popular ones. But the range of possibilities is part of the problem. How do you know if your recipient can restore an encoded message back to its binary format?

A TECHNICAL DIGRESSION. A companion standard, MIME, defines what most SMTP messages actually look like and (sort of) addresses the encoding problem. MIME handles formatting for anything other than a simple text message. MIME solves two problems: how to describe attachments and how to encapsulate binary attachments through an SMTP system that assumes message data is entirely ASCII. However, MIME allows for a wide variety of data types, character sets, and encoding schemes. That makes it useful for all kinds of e-mail traffic but still leaves us wondering if the e-mail system we're transmitting to can understand the encoding and character sets that our system uses. If you're mixing and matching clients, make sure they speak the same MIME component standards.

The last of the three primary standards, POP3, is the lynch pin of the whole setup. In most cases, it's not practical to set up clients as SMTP hosts. Rather you'll set up a host to act as a post office for storing clients' mail until they retrieve it using POP3. With POP3, users scan messages in their post office mailbox and selectively retrieve them. Generally speaking, POP3 clients store downloaded messages in whatever local database the e-mail client includes. That leaves your corporate e-mail scattered on clients throughout the network. It saves on server resources but probably isn't the best trade-off.

Increasingly, SMTP front ends support a better alternative, the Internet Message Access Protocol, Version 4 (IMAP4). This alternative to POP3 allows clients far more interactive control of the mail that resides on the host. Rather than just scanning and retrieving mail, IMAP4 allows users to create hierarchical folders, mark messages as read, and other activities directly on the host's mailboxes. With IMAP4-compliant hosts, you can set up a very traditional centralized message storage that allows any combination of clients to access their mail from anywhere on the network.

This sort of e-mail configuration just hasn't been practical for most PC networks, except perhaps Banyan Systems Inc. sites. But the lure of open standards is more than just marketing hype -- it can get you out of the corner most PC e-mail systems have boxed you into. And if you're still using Unix mail for part of your enterprise, SMTP front ends are probably worth consideration.

Product overview

Eudora Pro 2.0

Founded in 1985, Qualcomm Inc. develops wireless communications and electronic messaging solutions for the Internet. In addition to its best-selling product, Eudora, its product line includes OmniTracs System, a two-way mobile satellite communications and tracking system. According to International Data Corp. (IDC), Qualcomm claimed 64.7 percent of all e-mail software revenues in 1995.

To increase the number of Eudora users (and increase mind share), Qualcomm distributes one version for free over the Internet -- Eudora Light for Windows, Version 1.5 -- and sells another -- Eudora Pro. Eudora Light offers a fraction of the features of Eudora Pro, which includes support for Windows 95 and NT, Web browser integration, Multipurpose Internet Mail Extensions (MIME) encoding/decoding, context-sensitive on-line help, automatic attachments opening, automatic finishing of nicknames, and mapping.

Eudora was developed by researchers at the University of Illinois and was used primarily for transmitting research information between educational institutions.

Eudora was licensed to Qualcomm in 1988 and is now available for PC, Macintosh, and Newton platforms.

Pronto Mail 2.01

CommTouch Software Inc., founded in 1991, develops messaging tools for mobile professionals, telecommuters, and home and office PC users. The company's charter is "to be a world leader in electronic messaging solutions and value-added applications for open systems and the Internet."

CommTouch's product line is distributed primarily through OEMs -- however, it also sells directly to end-users. Its flagship product is Pronto. Prior to the Version 2.01 release, Pronto was selected by Sun Microsystems Inc. to be integrated into the SolarNet line of PC networking products.

Pronto's claim to fame is its user interface, featuring split-screen folders and drag-and-drop capabilities. It supports a wide variety of standards, including TCP/IP, SLIP, Point to Point Protocol, MIME and Sun attachments, UUencode/UUdecode, Messaging API (MAPI), export and import to RFC822 format, Post Office Protocol (POP), SMTP, and WinSock.

Pronto is also available in a version for remote users called Pronto Mobile. This Internet mail client for TCP/IP and corporate networks was designed to help remote users quickly screen and prioritize large amounts of e-mail. Its rules engine processes and filters mail, eliminating time and money wasted on retrieving unnecessary mail and attachments.

Recent product development has focused on Internet security issues.

SuperTCP Suite 96

Frontier Technologies Corp., founded in 1982, is a provider of Internet and intranet networking applications for Windows, Windows 95, and Windows NT environments. Frontier's mission is "to pioneer Internet and intranet applications that make individuals more productive and businesses more competitive in a global market." The company's product line includes the SuperWeb Server, a Windows NT-based Web server optimized for intranet use. This product is geared toward companies with little or no Unix experience.

Unlike the other products in this comparison, Frontier's e-mail package is part of an application suite. SuperTCP Suite 96, the latest generation in the SuperTCP line, includes e-mail, terminal emulators, Internet access, an X-Windows server, network file system, and various other tools. This suite transparently supports 16- and 32-bit Internet and TCP/IP applications in Windows, Windows 95, and NT environments. Although the e-mail component of SuperTCP is not available as a stand-alone product, several other products in the suite are available separately, such as SuperTCP Internet, which includes MIME and MAPI e-mail, an Internet browser and organizer, and News reader.

Z-Mail 4.0

NCD Software Corp. is a wholly owned subsidiary of Network Computing Devices Inc. and was founded in 1988. NCD Software is a supplier of network software products, including PC-Xware for integrating Windows and DOS-based PCs into X/Unix networks, and Marathon, a TCP/IP network foundation.

According to IDC, Z-Mail ran a distant second behind Eudora in 1995, claiming 17.8 percent of total worldwide e-mail software revenues. In terms of dedicated e-mail clients ranked by new client shipments worldwide, Z-Mail claimed 15.8 percent, compared with Eudora's 70.9 percent, IDC reported.

Z-Mail is a cross-platform e-mail and messaging system for open systems environments. The product supports several Internet protocols, including SMTP, POP3, and MIME. NCD Software recently announced a new security feature for Z-Mail's messaging client that allows users to encrypt the body of an e-mail message and arbitrary data file attachments, as well as apply digital signatures.

NCD Software recently signed an agreement with Prodigy Services Co., wherein the on-line services provider will offer specialized Windows and Macintosh versions of Z-Mail. Prodigy also licensed NCD Software connectivity and networking technologies to use in its $1-per-hour Internet access product.

Installation and configuration

Eudora Pro 2.0: VERY GOOD

Overall, Eudora is easy to install and get running, and it has some features that no other packages offer. It automatically determines whether you're running Windows 3.1 or Windows 95 and installs the appropriate version to the drive and directory of your choice. Unfortunately, the program doesn't ask which Windows group it should use, a common but annoying installation oversight that we think could be easily fixed.

The first time you run Eudora, it does a good job of guiding you through the various setup parameters, including choosing your Domain Name System server, Mail Server, and POP3. First-time installers may find it easier to set up the program through the Tools options menu choice in the main dialog box, in which the options are clearly organized and labeled. Under the Messaging API (MAPI)

option, for instance, you can direct Eudora to trap all the MAPI calls from other applications. Similarly, if you're writing in Microsoft Word, and you select the option Send from the file menu, Eudora kicks in, allowing you to send the message. Once the message is gone, Eudora quits and you're returned to Word.

Eudora also allows you to specify how you want the program to participate in MAPI -- such as whether the MAPI server should never run, always run, or run only when Eudora is running. You can also ask that MAPI attachments never be deleted, or be deleted either after the message is sent or when the message is emptied from the trash.

Eudora, similar to Pronto, initializes WinSock when the program starts and contacts the host to retrieve messages. After retrieving all of the messages, it disconnects from the host. Finally, the button bar at the top of the message-creation screen allows for easy customization, including signature selection, word-wrap options, and return receipts.

Pronto Mail 2.01: SATISFACTORY

Installation on Pronto was problematic from the start. We never could get the program to work with Windows for Workgroups 3.11, although we did get it up and running on a Windows 95 system. You get to select the drive and directory for installation. And, to its credit, Pronto is the only program that lets you choose a Windows group for installation.

WinSock operation works well. It's initiated when it's supposed to, and it disconnects automatically after the message has been sent and received.

SuperTCP Suite 96: GOOD

SuperTCP's installation process is logical and easy, despite the fact that you'll be picking and choosing between several different applications, including the network file system, Internet Information Management, mainframe and minicomputer host access, and an X-Windows server. One nice feature is that if you make an inconsistent answer during the install program it will catch the error and let you correct your mistake.

During installation, the program prompts you through a series of screens for mail server information. (The documentation includes detailed instructions for all of the different platforms supported by this product: Windows 3.x, Windows 95, and Windows NT.) Once installed, you can modify any of the information entered during the setup process without having to quit. Some fonts are easily changed; others, such as message header information, you can't adjust.

Despite the conveniences, we encountered one severe installation problem. The program claimed it detected a version incompatibility with our Win32s library. When asked if we wanted to install a newer version, we said "yes." Wrong move. The program replaced some of the files in the Win32s library, thereby creating so many problems that we were unable to complete a second test install of Eudora. (The installation program died and then said we had an older version of Win32s.)

The system allows for some customization, in terms of button bar placement and icon size. But this is the least customizable of all the programs reviewed.

Z-Mail 4.0: VERY GOOD

Z-Mail, which comes on either floppy disks or CD-ROM, provides considerable flexibility during installation. The program checks to see which version of Windows is running and whether this is a new install or an update to an existing version. But the user chooses the directory and drive manually and then selects e-mail options, including SMTP hosts, PC hosts, mail hosts, an address book host, and the local time zone.

Similar to many application packages, though, your own mistakes may not be readily apparent, and the package doesn't point them out for you. When setting up Z-Mail, for instance, we incorrectly entered information on the POP3 server, which resulted in our being able to send mail but not receive it. The program offered no help sorting out what went wrong.

An initial setup screen allows you to select a number of options, including host-based parameters such as connection, incoming-and-outgoing mail services, system directories, modem settings, log-in information, and display fonts. Don't tinker with the latter, though: When we changed the font on the message-header display screen to Arial, hardly an exotic font in our book, the nicely spaced lines under the header became a picture of chaos on-screen.

A bigger problem is that you can only get to the setup options on the initial Z-Mail screen where you enter your user ID and password. If you want to change an option while you're actually using the program, you have to quit and then launch it again to get to the settings screen. NCD Software says this protects the settings from casual user mistakes. We say it's a pain.

Despite that lock on setup options, Z-Mail is the only program that allows users to customize dialog scripts for communicating with a dial-up service. The interface is great: You get four options (send, expect, prompt, or pause) for each string variable, rather than being given some directions and a separate editor screen.

Z-Mail's scripting language is so powerful, in fact, that you could probably rewrite the whole program if you were so moved. Those with lesser ambitions might just want to use it to customize parameters such as new message handling, system start-up, and system close. You can add features, buttons, and menu items; have the program call up other programs (such as your calendar); and even have the program page you if you get messages from that certain somebody. Or you can create macros to take care of a variety of

different chores, such as sorting incoming messages by sender or subject matter. Still, power comes with price. Although Z-Mail provides directions for scripting, this is definitely a programming language and takes some skill to learn to use.

Z-Mail is the only program that is available on several different platforms, including Unix, Motif, Windows, and Macintosh. This is great for offices that support a range of environments.

Creating and sending messages

Eudora Pro 2.0: VERY GOOD

Eudora's message-creation system is easy to use and offers you more options at your fingertips than any other package reviewed. But a few minor omissions kept this package from reaching an excellent score.

In general, the program is flexible and smart. You can choose to send a message immediately or send it to the mail host for later transmission. Dialog boxes are clear, but if you get confused about on-screen icons, Eudora's balloon help provides guidance.

We were surprised that Eudora provided no message templates. Such fill-in-the-blank message forms can be very useful in a corporate environment, where people regularly query system support, human resources, and other departments for standard information or in standard formats.

Eudora does support the use of nicknames (or aliases), and you can view your list on both the message-creation screen and the pull-down menu. The pull-down Recipient List contains frequently used nicknames. This is a shortcut to a shortcut, and one we thought was pretty clever.

Still, the nickname system isn't very flexible. You can't expand the nickname in the body of the letter to view its full address, for instance. And if you use a nickname, such as Annual Report, to refer to a group of people, you can't easily delete a member of the group for the purpose of one message. You can create a new group based on an existing group, but that's still an extra step.

You can import a nickname file from another program, so that you don't have to redefine all of your favorite aliases. But just because this feature exists doesn't mean it's easy. The layout of this file isn't defined in either the printed documentation or the on-line help file. To use it, you need to edit the EUDORA.INI file, using an editor of your choice, because the options in this file are not modifiable through the graphical interface.

Document attachment is easy. But even though you do it through a standard Windows-style dialog box, the presentation of the attached files on the message-creation screen is not quite as graphically pleasing as that of Z-Mail. Eudora is the only program that allows you to attach more than one document at a time with a message. Viewing an attachment is as simple as double-clicking; deleting attachments simply involves selecting them and pressing the Delete key.

Pronto Mail 2.01: GOOD

Pronto's message-creation screen is clean and straightforward, but the program is missing some standard features. Many of the features it does include are clumsy.

Message attachment is fairly easy: When you attach a document to a message, the screen splits at the bottom to show the attachment titles and application icons. That same screen gives the recipient the option of viewing, saving, or deleting the message. But the program could benefit from a more intelligent application-launching function. For instance, when we went to view a document with Pronto, the program launched Microsoft Word from scratch, rather than switching to the version that was already running on our system. Even worse, every time we tried to attach a Word document, the program questioned the Word icon, which was a little off-putting.

You can develop aliases: Pronto calls the list of nicknames an Address Book, which you can access via a button on screen or through the menu. But there's no option to automatically view the full address of the recipient. And Pronto's group mail function is the oddest of the lot: You enter all of the addresses in a single entry field, which makes it hard to review and even harder to edit.

You can choose from among 27 preset buttons for the toolbar, but this hardly compares to the scripting capabilities offered by Z-Mail.

SuperTCP Suite 96: GOOD

SuperTCP has the simplest and most straightforward message screen of all of the packages. But don't get too excited: Part of the reason that it's simple is because a number of features are missing, such as the ability to send blind carbon copies, select signature selection, and display attached documents.

One nice feature we noticed right off is that all options have Word labels, which clarifies icons that can often be mystifying on a new product. And because the overall message-creation screen bears a striking resemblance to the one used in Microsoft Mail 3.2, it's relatively easy to learn this product.

Attaching a document is simple: You just do it through the message-creation screen. But both the document name and the application icon are displayed on a separate screen altogether, which means there's no way for the sender to check to see if the 1995 budget in Word is attached, for instance, or the 1996 budget in Word Perfect, without switching back and forth.

SuperTCP does allow you to display a list of all-known aliases, as well as create a new alias on the fly. It's possible to assign an alias to a standard group of people, but you don't automatically see the full addresses of the individual members.

Z-Mail 4.0: VERY GOOD

Z-Mail is the only program that displays the full address of the alias you choose.

Z-Mail has a number of features that no other package offers. As soon as you want to create a message in Z-Mail, for instance, you have the option of working on- or off-line, which can save considerable money in on-line costs. (If you choose to work on-line, the program will first send and retrieve any outstanding messages.) And Z-Mail is the only program that displays the full address of the alias you choose.

But if you're writing a message to your boss and you decide that Bozo is not a good alias for him, you can't change it to Sir while you're working. Instead, you have to discard that message, create the new alias, and start again. (NCD Software says you can switch back and forth between the two screens, but we couldn't get it to work.)

If your alias refers to a group of people, Z-Mail also displays the full mail address of each recipient, and deleting or adding members doesn't affect the original group. You can't import an alias file from another program, but you can write a macro that will do that for you, if necessary.

Attaching a document to a message is quite easy, and you can add a comment to the attachment, as well as pick the style of encoding that you want. The system defaults to a particular encoding, based on the file extension of the file being attached. Unfortunately, you can't change this without using an editor. When you select the attachment, Z-Mail launches the correct application, but similar to Pronto, it doesn't launch an open version of the application -- it opens a new one from scratch. This takes up needless time and space.

Z-Mail is the only program that does an automatic address check as you enter it, thus preventing the frustrating experience of having a message bounce back because you wrote don@idc and not don@igc. And if you like working with a Unix-style command line, Z-Mail is the only program that includes one. The command line controls basically any operation of Z-Mail and can be turned on or off with a simple menu choice.

Template creation is a little dicey. You really have to base it on an existing template -- if you don't do it just right, nothing happens, not even an error message. After you select a template, a new message screen is created, based on the correct layout. But again, it would be nice to be told what you were doing wrong as you did it.

Messaging

Eudora Pro 2.0: VERY GOOD

Eudora offers a fine array of message-handling options. You can set up rules (or mail filters) to act automatically on messages that are incoming or outgoing, for instance. Or you can set up rules to search manually on demand. Because Eudora's rule system is based on a Boolean system, you can search for many kinds of combinations. And you can apply a wide variety of actions on the filtered messages. If you ask the program to filter for "annual report" and "budget," for instance, you can have the messages saved to your 1996 folder or forwarded to someone else. Or you can ask it to delete any messages with the words "We're downsizing" or "This was due yesterday" -- unless they're from Ellen, in which case you can direct the program to flag them as Urgent.

We also liked Eudora's folder system. Mailboxes are actually subsets of folders, which you can nest within each other. (For example, you can create a Budget folder as part of the Zap Magazine mailbox, which is part of the On-line Publications mailbox.) Names can include as many as 31 characters, which helps promote sanity in labeling. Transferring messages from one folder to another and moving, renaming, or deleting folders or mailboxes is a cinch with a dialog box.

Eudora's text-finding function is thorough and logical. When you enter text in the Find screen, Eudora searches all the mailboxes and folders. After a match is found, you can repeat the search starting at the current point, the next message, or the next mailbox -- a refinement that makes the entire search function far more user-friendly.

Eudora displays the names of all the files attached to a message; to open them you simply double-click on the file name. Icons for the attachment's application, however, don't show. This is a minor, but irritating, omission.

Pronto Mail 2.01: GOOD

Similar to other features in Pronto, the message-handling capabilities exist, but they're pretty limited. The Find text feature only looks at the current document, rather than multiple documents or a series of folders, for instance. And Pronto Mail also doesn't offer as many rule-writing options as the other packages.

What rules you can write, however, you can write easily. You can set up filters for both incoming and outgoing messages, using a very helpful dialog box. (You can use the Show Some Messages command to look through existing folders, but you can only go through one folder at a time.) You can also temporarily disable a rule, so you don't have to delete it entirely and then recreate it when you need it again.

The program allows you to create a folder hierarchy (which appears in a window next to the main screen), and folder names can be pretty long. But you have to include an underscore between the words, which is annoying.

SuperTCP Suite 96: SATISFACTORY

For a package that includes so many goodies, SuperTCP's message-handling functions are pretty bare bones. Rule writing, for instance, is limited to incoming mail; there's no way to save, forward, or otherwise handle outgoing messages.

Folder functions are a little more sophisticated. You can set up a hierarchical series of folders, which is displayed on a separate dialog box. You can also develop long folder names. And moving messages between folders is easily accomplished via a dialog box.

The program has the worst text-finding capabilities of the packages compared, because you can only search the document you have open, rather than all the documents in a folder or all the folders.

One big problem we encountered using SuperTCP was message corruption. We embedded a ClarisWorks document as part of a message and then experimented by sending this document between the various packages. When we sent the document from Z-Mail to Eudora or vice versa, everything went well. When we sent from either Z-Mail or Eudora to SuperTCP, the document arrived corrupted. Specifically, when we opened the document in Word, all of the UUencode text was wrapped around the message. We experienced similar problems when sending a .WAV file.

Z-Mail 4.0: GOOD

If you want it, you can get it in Z-Mail. But for those who don't like to program, the message-handling options are limited. For instance, Z-Mail offers no automatic rules or filters. Good directions for programming them are in the manual, but this could put you off.

Z-Mail does support multiple folders and nesting of folders. Name length depends on your operating system's naming standards (for example, in DOS you get only eight characters). If you don't write any special macros to run on start-up, only one mailbox will open.

The folder hierarchy nature appears only when you open up a mailbox (similar to when you open a folder in Windows, you can see the file structure). This works, but it's not as clear as with Eudora and SuperTCP, which provide graphical means of navigating through the folders and mailboxes.

Z-Mail does make it easy to find text in active or open folders. When the program finds the search string requested, it highlights the title of the document. But you can't look at text that's not in an open folder. Of course, you can always write a macro that will open all the folders (or a range of folders) when Z-Mail starts up.

One of the greatest drawbacks in message handling is that the summary list of e-mail messages doesn't show whether or not there are any attached files. The attachments themselves, however, show the file name as well as the icon associated with the application.

Report Card: SMTP e-mail front ends

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Eudora Pro 2.0 Qualcomm Inc. San Diego (800) 238-3672, (619) 658-1291 http://www.qualcomm.com
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(Weighting) Performance:

Installation and configuration (150) Very Good 112.50 Eudora is easy to install, and it offers plenty of options, including doing your setup through a pull-down menu and configuring Messaging API (MAPI) six different ways. The only glitch is minor: You can't choose the Windows group you want the program to land in.

Creating and sending messages (250) Very Good 187.50 Eudora's message-creation system is easy, logical, and flexible, and it offers more options at your fingertips than any other package reviewed. But it doesn't provide templates, and the alias file isn't quite as useful as it could be.

Messaging (250) Very Good 187.50 Eudora offers great mail-handling options. Rules are flexible, and the folder system is infinitely nestable and manipulatable. We'd like to see some application icons next to the attachments, though.

Support and pricing:

Documentation (75) Very Good 56.25 Eudora deserves high marks for its users' manual, which covers both basic and advanced topics. The index includes several examples for each operation, which helps you find what you need quickly and accurately. However, the screen shots are all in Windows 95, which can be frustrating for Windows 3.x users. And the on-line help file, though complete, isn't context-sensitive.

Support policies (100) Excellent 100.00 Qualcomm's impressive support policies earned it the highest possible score. It offers 90 days of free support (if purchased directly) and a 30-day money-back guarantee. Toll-free technical support is available weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Pacific time. The company also offers e-mail, BBS, and fax support.

Technical support (100) Satisfactory 50.00 We found Eudora's support technicians to be very polite and knowledgeable. We not only received answers to our questions but were provided with additional tips for setup and configuration. Unfortunately, we were on hold for an average of 30 minutes per call.

Pricing (75) Satisfactory 37.50 Eudora's list price is $89. Site-licensing discounts bring the cost for 100 users to a reasonable $4,750.

Final score 7.3

Pronto Mail 2.01 CommTouch Software Inc. Sunnyvale, Calif. (408) 245-8682 http://www.commtouch.com

(Weighting) Performance:

Installation and configuration (150) Satisfactory 75.00 Installation on Windows 95 went fine, and we liked the WinSock performance. But we never got Pronto installed on our Windows for Workgroups system, which brought the score down.

Creating and sending messages (250) Good 156.25 We had trouble attaching Word documents, and the alias function is very clunky. However, message creation is very intuitive.

Messaging (250) Good 156.25 You can handle messages with Pronto by sorting incoming and outgoing mail. But Find functions are limited, as are rule-writing options. File naming is also awkward. Again, its easy-to-use interface saved Pronto's score.

Support and pricing:

Documentation (75) Unacceptable 0.00 There's a lot missing here -- including a hard-copy manual. Pronto provides users with a 54-page manual on disk in Microsoft Word format; but the version number for the document was 2.0, and the disk said it was 2.01. The same document can be downloaded from the World Wide Web, but the README file never mentioned that. And besides, who wants to bother?

Support policies (100) Good 62.50 After a 30-day free trial, you get unlimited e-mail support and unlimited phone support (on your own dime) weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Pacific time. Fax support is also available, but there are no custom support plans.

Technical support (100) Poor 25.00 During our installation troubles with Pronto, technical support took two days to respond. They were friendly once they called; one technician even sent e-mail with further suggestions. But the tips were late in coming -- and didn't help.

Pricing (75) Good 46.87 Pronto checks in with the best price of the four: $69 list price; $3,900 to equip 100 users.

Final score 5.2

SuperTCP Suite 96 Frontier Technologies Corp. Mequon, Wis. (800) 929-3054, (414) 241-4555 http://www.frontiertech.com

(Weighting) Performance:

Installation and configuration (150) Good 93.75 Despite the dizzying array of applications available, installing e-mail is pretty straightforward. You can easily modify setup options, and you can customize some aspects of the program. However, installation wreaked havoc on our Win32s library.

Creating and sending messages (250) Good 156.25 SuperTCP has the simplest and most straightforward message screen of all of the packages. But once you attach a document, you can't tell what it is and you can't view full addresses on aliases.

Messaging (250) Satisfactory 125.00 SuperTCP has the most limited message-handling function. You can only categorize incoming mail (even Pronto lets you do more). And you can only look for text in the document that's open, never mind a whole folder. Text-corruption trouble also brought the score down.

Support and pricing:

Documentation (75) Satisfactory 37.50 Documentation for this product only covers installation. You can figure out how to make the program run via the context-sensitive on-line help, but even that is pretty thin. Documentation was so sparse, in fact, that we didn't even venture into MAPI functions or mailbox synchronization.

Support policies (100) Very Good 75.00 SuperTCP provides a 30-day money-back guarantee, plus unlimited, non-toll-free technical support weekdays from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Central time. Technical support is also available through CompuServe, BBS, e-mail, and fax. Custom support and update packages are available.

Technical support (100) Good 62.50 Similar to Eudora, SuperTCP's technical support was very professional and helpful. Unlike Eudora, we only had to wait for 15 minutes before we reached a technical support representative.

Pricing (75) Satisfactory 37.50 A special e-mail and Internet application (with a Web browser, Gopher Plus, WAIS, Multipurpose Internet Mail Extensions and MAPI mail, Telnet, and News reader) costs $125; $52.50 for a 100-user license.

Final score 5.8

Z-Mail 4.0 NCD Software Corp. Novato, Calif. (415) 898-8649 http://www.ncd.com

(Weighting) Performance:

Installation and configuration (150) Very Good 112.50 Z-Mail does a lot of the installation work for you. But if you need to change setup options, you have to quit the program to access the appropriate screen. Still, Z-Mail's scripting language makes any wish a program command. It's the only program available on a wide range of OSes.

Creating and sending messages (250) Very Good 187.50 You can program anything you want for message creation; but if you don't want to program, your options are limited. One big plus: Z-Mail is the only program that automatically displays the full address of an alias. Automatic address check is also a bonus.

Messaging (250) Good 156.25 If you're not into programming, you won't get a lot here. You have to write macros for any kind of rules. The Find Text function works well, but it only works for open folders. And you can't tell if incoming mail carries an attachment or not.

Support and pricing:

Documentation (75) Very Good 56.25 Z-Mail wins the prize for shipping the most documentation. Setup and usage were amply covered, and we were pleased to see notes on Z-POP installation, plus a thorough Z-Script cookbook. The context-sensitive on-line help is reasonably complete .

Support policies (100) Good 62.50 Z-mail offers a 30-day money-back guarantee and warranty. Support hours are weekdays from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. Pacific time. Custom support plans are available for site licenses. There's no toll-free number, CompuServe forum, or BBS support, although there is fax and e-mail support.

Technical support (100) Very Good 75.00 We reached Z-Mail's technical support group in less than 2 minutes every time we called. Combine this with polite, well-informed technicians, and what you have is the best technical support score of the bunch.

Pricing (75) Poor 18.75 Z-Mail is the most expensive of the four products: $95 list price; $7,000 to equip 100 users.

Final score 6.6

GUIDE

InfoWorld Reviews only finished, production versions of products, never beta-test versions. Products receive ratings ranging from unacceptable to excellent in various categories.

Scores are derived by multiplying the weighting of each criterion by its rating, where:

Excellent = 1.0 - Outstanding in all areas.

Very Good = 0.75 - Meets all essential criteria and offers significant advantages.

Good = 0.625 - Meets essential criteria and includes some special features.

Satisfactory = 0.5 - Meets essential criteria.

Poor = 0.25 - Falls short in essential areas.

Unacceptable or N/A = 0.0 - Fails to meet minimum standards or lacks this feature.

Scores are summed, divided by 100, and rounded down to one decimal place to yield the final score out of a maximum possible score of 10 (plus bonus). Products rated within 0.2 points of one another differ little. Weightings represent average relative importance to InfoWorld readers involved in purchasing and using that product category. You can customize the Report Card to your company's needs by using your own weightings to calculate the final score.

The Test Center Hot Pick is InfoWorld's award for outstanding products. To receive the Test Center Hot Pick seal, a product has to offer what InfoWorld deems to be a stand-out feature or technology that is unusually valuable or revolutionary compared to competitors. The product must also score at least satisfactory in all Report Card categories and receive a final score of 7.0 or more.

INFOWORLD ELECTRIC

For a quick overview of what these products feature, visit InfoWorld Electric at http://www.infoworld.com/pageone/testcenter/side.htm#features.

According to International Data Corp., some vendors will respond to the demand for open Internet-style messaging without adding SMTP/Post Office Protocol (POP) support and instead will provide Web browser access to user mailboxes -- a solution that has the added benefit of providing users with access to fuller functionality than is available in SMTP/POP systems today.

YOU CAN TAKE IT WITH YOU

Tired of having to download mail onto floppy disks while you're on the road? Z-Mail supports a superset of POP3 called Z-POP, which allows you to synchronize the downloading of mail files to multiple machines. If you work in Kansas City, for instance, but you're in Boston, you can have the files saved on the server until you download them on your primary computer. (In order to use this, your mail provider has to have the Z-POP software running on his or her mail server, which, by the way, they can get free.)

FONT FORMATTING

If you want to change fonts on the message-creation screen in Z-Mail, it's best to use a single-spaced font, such as Courier, rather than proportionally based fonts, such as Arial, which create chaos.

DAVINCI GETS NEW CLOTHES

On Technology Corp. announced a new version of its DaVinci eMail package that provides native support for SMTP and Multipurpose Internet Mail Extensions (MIME).

The DaVinci SMTP eMail package includes an implementation of POP3 that runs over both IP and IPX, allowing those with a NetWare environment to avoid an immediate shift to TCP/IP on the LAN and the accompanying placement of TCP/IP stacks on each desktop that most Internet e-mail packages require.

Also added is MIME support, which allows users to exchange files without loss of data integrity. Finally, a special Work Offline option has been added that allows remote users to store messages in an outbox while working off-line.

DaVinci SMTP eMail is available for $999 from On Technology. On Technology can be reached at (617) 374-1400.

GLOSSARY

FTP (File Transfer Protocol): A set of commands used to log on to the network, list directories, and copy files in a TCP/IP network.

MAPI (Messaging API): A programming interface that enables an application to send and receive mail with Microsoft Mail messaging system; Simple MAPI: A subset of MAPI that includes a dozen functions for sending and retrieving mail.

MIME (Multipurpose Internet Mail Extensions): An application protocol that acts as extensions to the SMTP format, which allows it to carry multiple types of data, such as binary, and audio.

POP (Post Office Protocol): A protocol typically used by an e-mail program to download messages from a mail server on the Internet.

SMTP (Simple Mail Transfer Protocol): A TCP/IP that governs e-mail transmissions and receptions.

TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol): A communications protocol that was originally the Unix standard but is now supported on almost all platforms.

Related Article: RESULTS AT A GLANCE

There are several reasons why SMTP e-mail might be the solution to your e-mail needs: You've already invested in Unix, want to deploy Windows PCs to the desktop, and are sick of command-line e-mail; you're planning to invest in Unix servers and want to extend the investment to provide easy Internet e-mail access via SMTP; or you don't have the desire, resources, or expertise to maintain an e-mail system and prefer to access the Internet via a POP3 service provider. We tested four SMTP e-mail front-end packages, and, with an almost two-point difference between the winner and loser, we found that, indeed, not all packages are created equal.

Qualcomm Inc.'s Eudora Pro 2.0 came out on top primarily because its rule-writing and text-searching features are outstanding, and WinSock and Messaging API functions work as they should. It is also the easiest to install, easy to customize, and comes with a plethora of message-handling options. Our only complaints are minor: We wish the program included features such as message templates and address display. Context-sensitive help would make it easier to use the program's great features, too.

With Z-Mail 4.0, from NCD Software Corp., you can create the e-mail system of your dreams. The catch is that you do indeed have to create it. The scripting language is powerful, but the program in general isn't as "friendly" or complete as Eudora.

To make up for the time lost learning how to best use the programming language, Z-Mail does offer some pretty nice features, such as automatic address checking, easy attachment encoding, and easy template creation. Finally, Z-Mail is the only program that is available on multiple operating systems, including Unix, Motif, and Macintosh.

SuperTCP Suite 96, from Frontier Technologies Corp., registers in at a distant third because, although it has a lot of functionality, outstanding e-mail isn't one of them. You can create messages and send them off, but you can't do much else, including write useful rules, send blind carbon copies, or customize the toolbar. Installation troubles and file corruptions made us very nervous. Add poor documentation to the mix, and you come up with a pretty mediocre e-mail program.

Unfortunately, Pronto Mail 2.01, from CommTouch Software Inc., hasn't outgrown its Cracker Jack box-like image. The program performs at an acceptable level, and the screens look OK; but the attachment and group mail functions are the clunkiest of the lot. It

doesn't ship with any documentation, and when we had difficulty setting up the program on Windows for Workgroups 3.x, it took two days for technical support to return our phone calls. What saves the program overall is its ease of use and straightforward interface.

The Score

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Eudora Pro 2.0 7.3 Z-Mail 4.0 6.6 SuperTCP Suite 96 5.8 Pronto Mail 2.01 5.2
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Related Article: HOW WE TESTED -- SMTP E-MAIL FRONT ENDS

SMTP e-mail front ends may not be the zenith of messaging interfaces, but they certainly have come a long way from their humble command-line origins. For any organization integrating Windows desktop PCs into an existing Unix-based messaging environment, these products may be exactly what you need.

Our intent during testing was to find the products that required the least amount of work from the e-mail administrator in terms of installing and supporting the client, while offering the most messaging power and flexibility to users. We also placed a good deal of emphasis on ease of use.

We tested these front-end products with both Windows 3.11 running on a Gateway 2000 Inc. 66-MHz 486 with 32MB of RAM, and with Windows 95 running on an Austin Computer Systems Inc. 90-MHz Pentium with 40MB of RAM.

PERFORMANCE: Installation and configuration

An easy-to-install e-mail front end makes an e-mail administrator happy, although the right customization options let users work the way they want. We installed each client on Windows 3.1 and Windows 95 workstations and connected to our POP3 server to see if the product was working properly. We gave a score of satisfactory if the client software installed without mishap, conserved memory and system resources, and connected successfully. We also expected basic customization options such as adding items to the menu or changing the content of button bars.

We added points for installation routines that made setup especially painless. These days most shops are running more than just Windows systems -- so we gave extra points for multiplatform client support.

Creating and sending messages

Above all, perhaps, an e-mail front end should make it simple to write and send messages by providing a straightforward editor and easy access to common commands. After creating a simple memo, we ran a spelling check, attached several different file types, cut and pasted a portion of a spreadsheet into the text of the message, and sent it. If we found we could perform the basics of creating a memo, add a file attachment, and send it without any trouble or file corruption, the product earned a score of satisfactory. We gave extra points if the software let us create aliases -- for example, Bill instead of president@whitehouse.gov -- for address book entries and made it easy to create groups of message recipients for repeated mass mailings. Furthermore, we hoped to find message templates or forms, which make it easy to request standard, field-based information.

Messaging

Given the deluge of information that can enter your inbox daily, e-mail software needs to provide convenient, flexible ways to manage the flood.

To speed the hunt for specific messages, we ran a search routine specifying a character string, organized received messages into folders or other receptacles, and ran rules -- routines for automatically saving, deleting, or archiving messages -- if available. For a score of satisfactory, the package had to let us complete these tasks in a straightforward way. We increased a product's score if it provided a wide array of search options, including searching for subject, author, and recipient. A thorough selection of rules, including forwarding and replying to messages, also earned extra points, as did especially well-designed methods for organizing received messages.

SUPPORT AND PRICING: Documentation

We evaluated the written documentation, on-line help, and other tools provided to help us learn about and use the product. The documentation had to be complete and clear enough to lead us through initial setup procedures and basic operations.

We awarded bonus points for a quick-start guide, on-line and written tutorials, a quick-reference card, thorough on-line (context-sensitive or hypertext-linked) help, and other useful materials. Poor organization, missing information, or an incomplete index lowered the score.

Support policies

To receive a score of satisfactory, a product had to provide some period of free support. We added bonus points for support via fax or on-line services (CompuServe, Internet, or a private BBS), a money-back guarantee, extended hours, a toll-free line, and corporate extended support plans.

Technical support

We based technical support scores on the quality of service we received during multiple anonymous calls to the vendor and on the availability of knowledgeable technicians. We awarded bonus points for extra helpfulness or useful tips and subtracted points for unreturned calls and long waits on hold.

Pricing

The pricing score reflects the cost of the package, taking into consideration the competition and the intended market. The score is not a reflection of the product's overall value, nor do we consider performance or other added features.

Citação da fonte (MLA 8)
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