

Brian Clegg believes that Apple is relying too much on **good looks** rather than innovation.

Core problems



Every now and then, the business world has to be reminded that Wintel PCs aren't the only option for desktop computing. Acorn's Archimedes still has a loyal following and it's not that long since the heady days of the

Commodore Amiga. But for business, unless you move up to high-end workstations, there is only one serious challenger – Apple.

As a long-term Apple fan, I'm worried about the future of this excitingly unconventional alternative to the button-down world of IBM compatibles. There's an old saying in business that you know a company is in trouble when it moves into a flashy new purpose-built headquarters. The argument is that a company with its eye on the ball is too busy turning out brilliant products to worry about buildings. If accommodation becomes a priority, it means you're distracted and at risk. My concern about Apple isn't exactly about buildings – but we'll come back to this later.

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First, let's take a trip back to 1984, when IBM's PC was the business standard. In three years those uninspiring machines with a crippled processor and a nasty, low-resolution screen had crushed the opposition. But then, during an ad break in the Super Bowl, Apple announced the amazing Macintosh. That first Mac had plenty of problems, but it was genuinely different. Elements of it had been done before – many in Apple's uncommercial Lisa – but as a personal computer for real people it was unparalleled. The PC was steam-aged in comparison. That crisp graphical display, the mouse, the menus, the common user interface – and you could even cut and paste between programs. It was electrifying.

And what did we do in the business world? We ignored it. Well, not quite. Macs crept in for specialist applications like desktop publishing, but on the whole we bought the IBM line that interaction with our mainframes would be better if we stuck to IBM-

compatible systems on the desktop. I can remember an IBM salesman at the time trying to persuade me that graphics screens were a passing fad. People would want them at home to play games, but we dealt with text, so what was the point?

Now move forward to the 1990s. Apple went on producing great products, but it lost that distinctive edge. The opposition had Windows, and though it was mostly inferior, it bettered the Mac on colour support and multitasking. Apple had gone from having a unique product to scrambling for points on functionality. John Sculley, then CEO of Apple, realised that he needed action. It's popular to mock Sculley now as technically incompetent. He is certainly a businessman first and foremost, but we shouldn't underestimate him. Sculley commissioned Knowledge Navigator, a video showing an Apple product 20 years in the future. It was superb. It was a real personal assistant on the desk, communicating by speech, interpreting and interpolating, so that when in the demonstration video the user asked for an academic paper using a vague title and possible authors, it easily retrieved the right text –

while simultaneously fending off a call from his mother. Okay, this was fiction, but it was inspiring. It would shake the IT world now, just as the Mac did in 1984. Sculley launched a first stepping-stone in that direction – the Newton PDA.

Newton received a lot of criticism because of its dependence on imperfect

handwriting recognition but it is often forgotten that it transformed the PDA from being little more than an electronic address book to providing a real extension of the desktop. Newton failed as a product, but it could have been the start of something big – it was designed to be the beginning of a whole family of information devices. Instead, Newton was scrapped as Sculley's baby. And what have we got now? iMac.

These latest Apple products are fine, and they're selling well – but how do they innovate? What makes them really different? Those arty transparent casings. Hence the earlier warning about designer buildings – when the thing that makes your product talked about is the casing design, you've got problems. Apple needs another Mac or (dare I say it) another Newton. It needs to recapture the vision of Knowledge Navigator. Don't let us down, guys.

brianc@pcw.co.uk