

Journalists can claim 'expertise' as a **perk of their profession**. But don't take all they write as read.

## Trust me, I was an IT doctor



We recently held some focus groups for *PCW*. This involved rounding up current and potential readers, putting them in a room and quizzing them about *PCW* and its competing titles. These exercises are generally a good way of finding

out how the magazine is positioned and how recognisable it is as a brand. The most interesting results came from those attendees who were not regular readers of *PCW*. The general consensus was positive, but on viewing the *Group Test* section, several of the candidates expressed concerns that they had no way of knowing whether the Editor knew anything about the technology or not. For all they knew I could just be writing what the manufacturers told me, or making up the results.

**After the initial anger** at these aspersions on my competency had subsided, it occurred to me that this was not just a wild slur on my character, but a genuine concern for the readers of any magazine. With any publication that involves evaluation of equipment, the readers have to take for granted that the Editor and staff are experts on the subject and are supplying competent and impartial advice.

Of course with IT journalism this is especially important. In the world of IT publishing there are generally two types of people, technologists who learn how to write and writers who learn about technology. To allay the concerns of my focus-group candidates, I fall firmly in the former category. Before I moved into the field of IT publishing I spent seven years in the world of high-performance computing. I have seen the computer industry go through many changes, starting my career in a mainframe environment, working with Amdahl systems running the MVS operating system. I also got to work with Cray and Convex supercomputers, DEC VAX machines, Silicon Graphics and Sun workstations and, of course, PCs.

I have seen the IT environment move from centralised computing with dumb terminals on people's desks, to having a user-definable PC on every desk. I've seen computing change from batch-oriented remote processing to local real-time file execution. I was involved

in the not-altogether-painless transition from the x.25 network protocol to the now *de facto* TCP/IP standard.

**If you're wondering why** I decided to give up computing in favour of journalism, it was partly due to the desire for a change of scene and also due to the fact that I saw the high-performance computing arena shrinking. When I started my career in the operations department of a large computer centre there were three shifts of eight people monitoring mainframe and supercomputer activity 24 hours a day. By the time I left there were only two people in the operations department monitoring the systems, and we had machines on desktops that were more powerful than the early mainframes I worked with. So, I decided to take my experience and write about computers, rather than configure and administer them.

However it's not only the readers who worry about the ability of the IT journalists. Manufacturers plough millions of pounds into the research and development of a product and it only takes one bad review to wipe out all that effort and investment. Of course, if a product is

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bad, then it deserves a bad review, regardless of how much money was spent in the research and development lab. But if the writer doesn't fully understand the product, then the review may not be a fair one and any later retraction or explanation is unlikely to repair the initial damage. It's therefore beneficial to both the reader and the manufacturer that the writers on a magazine have a thorough knowledge of the relevant technology.

That said, I'm not implying that an individual without a background in computing can't be a good IT journalist, far from it. What is vitally, important, however is that the writers on a computer-based magazine have a passion for technology, and it's this type of passion that I'm glad to say runs strongly through all the writers on *PCW*.

So, if you have ever worried about the experience and knowledge of the *PCW* editorial team, I hope I've managed to set your mind at rest.

**Riyad Emeran, Editor**