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Consumer Electronics

A Section of Television Digest with Consumer Electronics

STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

EIA's figures on total 1984 video sales to dealers are scheduled for release next week. For preview, see below.

1984 SALES--16,277,800 COLOR, 7,615,800 VCR: Color TV and VCR sales ended 1984 higher than most recent estimates, including those EIA used at CES last week. Official EIA figures, to be released this week, are expected to show dealers bought 16,277,800 direct-view color sets, a 15% increase over 1983, and 7,615,800 VCRs, up 86.1%.

Surge of sales in Dec. produced big numbers, and month was best in history for both color TV and VCR. In color, Dec. was first month ever to show sales in excess of 1.8 million units. For VCR, it was first to top million -- almost 1.2 million, actually. In smashing windup to 1984, final week's VCR sales, at 195,200 (up 108%), were best of any week to date, completely contrary to historical patterns, indicating large post-Christmas orders by dealers.

WINTER CES--NO STARS, BUT A HIT: At first glance, 1985 Winter CES didn't seem to have much going for it. Industry leaders were offering up forecasts for only modest sales growth, warning that getting profits would be tougher than ever. No really new product was on hand to promise billions of dollars in new sales. Without large contingent of videogame and videocassette software exhibits, excitement of show biz hoopla was absent. Attendance, nontrade media was lightest in years. And who said it never rains in Las Vegas?

In face of all that, show drew 101,665 attendees, beating out 1984 WCES by 10,420, even eclipsing all-time CES record of 98,271 set last summer in Chicago. Exhibitors actually were pleased with CES's return to no-nonsense business atmosphere, and mainstream companies and dealers were rebuilding Christmas-depleted inventories with vengeance and were significantly less interested in price than availability.

Show had new face. With such majors as GE, Hitachi, Magnavox, Panasonic and Quasar moved into private locations off main exhibit floor, displays by Korean trio of Daewoo, Gold Star and Samsung were among flashiest of TV exhibits on Convention Center floor, though they weren't drawing crowds as large as those that packed Fisher-Sanyo displays and elaborate Sears theater with its associated kiosks.

Buyers who came looking for down-&-dirty VCR pricing from Koreans went away empty-handed. Representative at Gold Star told us "if we can't make a profit [on VCRs], we won't sell them." But retailers were skeptical about staying power. "At these prices I don't need them," one dealer told us. "Let's see what they'll be asking in the spring when they have to start delivering."

VHS camcorder, Super Beta, 8mm Video and spate of new videocassette player (VCR) introductions provided more than enough excitement in video area, though without any real unanticipated innovation. VCR market could well turn into rat race in 1985. Dozen firms, including GE, Gold Star, Panasonic, Quasar, Samsung and bunch of smaller importers all were showing them, with dealer costs starting at \$199. One small importer was offering first Betamax VCR, sourced from Daewoo. Japan's Funai, which started market, distributed fliers inviting retailers to its off-floor display at Desert Inn, where it was selling in competition with

exclusive U.S. distributor Portavideo -- one of whose officials noted Funai's price was higher.

Color TV became mainstay adjunct for audio marketers at show. Importer Lloyds, now subsidiary of Bacardi, was showing off its new financial strength with full-line display oforean-made color portables, plus VCRs sourced from NEC and Samsung, promising it would be strong competitor of Emerson. Low-fi market leader Soundesign, company that originated audio rack systems, offered collection of video-audio systems, with starting prices of \$499 for unit with 13" color monitor and \$799 for 20".

At higher end, Harman-Kardon, Marantz and Symphonic were among audio component companies to introduce color monitors, while Fisher announced it would have MTS stereo as standard feature on all its VHS Hi-Fi VCRs this year. Video switchers, enhancers, tuners and multichannel TV sound were showing up as components in increasing numbers of audio systems.

Details on product highlights, comments from industry leaders, reports on show seminars and news conferences can be found elsewhere in this issue.

THE 2 FACES OF SONY--SUPER BETA AND 8mm: Sony was involved in 2 major news conferences in span of 5 days: (1) In Las Vegas, as prime mover in Beta group manufacturers' announcement of Super Beta system, "the first major improvement in basic home VCR picture quality." (2) In Tokyo, where parent company held its biggest press event in 3 years to announce start of sales of 8mm camcorder and cassettes there.

Las Vegas news conference didn't mention 8mm but did demonstrate new version of Betamovie with CCD pickup at around \$1,600 from Beta manufacturers. Tokyo conference also showed new Betamovie and, almost as afterthought, demonstrated "High Band Beta," name it reserves there for Super Beta. In U.S., Sony says it hasn't decided when it will introduce 8mm, but parent company Pres. Norio Ohga said in Japan that American debut "definitely" would be this year. Sony displayed 8mm camcorder in Las Vegas hotel suite but not at its exhibit. In addition, Ohga, 8mm conference in Japan drew all top Sony luminaries, including Honorary Chmn. Masaru Ibuka and Chmn. Akio Morita.

Sony's Video 8 camcorder weighs 4.34 lb. without battery or tape, less than 5.1 lb. with, will list at about \$1,100 when it goes on sale Jan. 21. Camera section has CCD image sensor with 250,000 pixels (apparently same one used in CCD Betamovie), 1" electronic viewfinder, with complete playback system including search and freeze, has accessory tuner-timer. Sony said it developed new LSIs for system to reduce required voltage to 5 volts, cut mechanism and circuit board size by 40% as compared with smallest portable Betamax.

Sony announced it would offer 8mm metal particle cassettes in 30-, 60- and 90-min. sizes this month in Japan, followed soon by 2-hour cassette. In addition to own brand, Sony is heavily committed to OEM market for 8mm camcorders, to be sold under brands of Aiwa, Fuji, Pioneer and Yashica. Reports in Japan indicate Eastman Kodak, whose camcorders are made by Matsushita, is talking with Sony about further 8mm supply.

Super Beta recording system, as shown at CES, produced finer, more detailed picture -- at about 300 lines of resolution and 45dB signal-to-noise ratio, it fell short of what many had predicted for such super VCR systems. Most impressive demonstration was potential for some editing and dubbing, in which 4th-generation tape made on super machine was better than 3rd generation from standard Beta.

Super Beta is scheduled for availability by midyear from Beta group members. Although prices weren't mentioned, implication was that new recording system would be feature of top-of-line machines. From their comments, it was unclear whether Sony or any other Beta group members really planned to push duplicators to convert their operations to Super Beta.



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