

In praise of PaperPort

Scanner proves one of the most useful office devices, even given its glitches / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

SITTING ON MY DESK-top next to my computer is a two-year-old Visioneer PaperPort Vx scanner. The scanner, without question, is one of the most useful devices in my office.

When Visioneer advertised its scanner as being "the easiest way to get paper into your computer," it wasn't kidding. If the PaperPort is working properly, it is a dream come true. You just push a piece of paper into the slot on the front of the machine and a tiny motor comes to life, sucking your paper through the machine and across the scanner's head. As the paper moves through the scanner, a copy appears on your computer's screen, ready for all kinds of digital manipulations.

Thanks to my PaperPort scanner, I have been able to avoid purchasing both a photocopier and a fax machine. To make a copy of something, I just scan it and print it. To fax something, I scan it and then send it out with my computer's fax modem. And if I think that I'm ever going to need to make a second copy of the document or fax it to somebody else, I keep the digital copy on my computer's hard drive.

Visioneer still sells the PaperPort Vx for Macintosh for \$159; if you have a PC, you can buy the improved Mx for the same price. (If you are on a budget, you might try giving Visioneer a call: two months ago I bought a reconditioned Vx scanner for \$119.) Both of these are black-and-white units that can scan in 256 shades of gray and up to 400 dots per inch, although if you are going to be

faxing there is no sense in scanning more than 200 dots per inch, because that's fax resolution.

The PaperPort software is also great for filling out forms — especially handy these days with the demise of electric typewriters. I just scan in the form, open it with PaperPort, and then type in my name and other information. If I filled out a lot of forms, I would probably buy Visioneer's Form-Types, a \$19.95 PaperPort add-on that recognizes the fields and lets you use the tab key to move between them.

If you want to scan color photographs, you can buy Visioneer's PaperPort Strobe for \$299. Alternatively, you can get Visioneer's PaperPort 3000, a really great flatbed scanner that has an astonishingly low price of just \$149. This is a professional-quality scanner with 30 bits of color resolution per pixel.

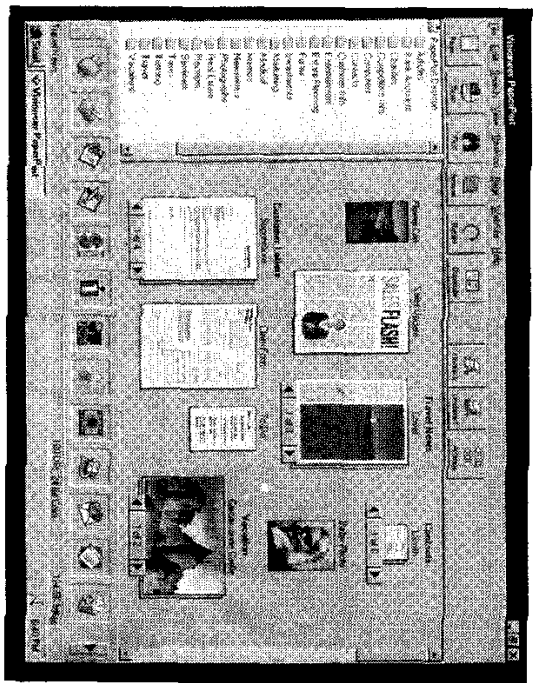
Flatbed scanners are considerably more flexible than sheet-fed scanners. You can scan a book without ripping out the pages. You can scan jewelry and other small objects. On the other hand, it takes considerably longer to scan a stack of paper with a flatbed scanner than with the sheet-fed unit. And the flatbed scanner takes up a lot of desk space. The energy-conscious won't like the fact that the PaperPort 3000 never turns off its minifluorescent bulb.

Visioneer's black-and-white scanners connect to your computer's serial port or, with an adapter, to the parallel port on a PC or the SCSI port on a Macintosh. But the flatbed scanners have only a parallel interface. For this reason, they work only on Windows 95 — and not Windows NT or the Macintosh.

Beyond its dominant position in the world of scanner hardware, Visioneer has also completely taken over the world of scanner software with its PaperPort Deluxe 5.1 software. Even

Visioneer's competitors ship with the company's software. And as PC software goes, it's pretty good. Scanned documents appear on the program's "desktop" (not to be confused with your computer's desktop), where you can rotate it, touch it up, add your own annotations, or stack multiple pages together. You can give documents names and file them away in folders. There's even a variety of tools for correcting color images, including changing the color balance and removing "red eye."

Visioneer's desktop software includes a fairly decent optical character-recognition system, which translates the image of text into actual letters. The OCR isn't accurate enough to substitute as a typist — it makes several mistakes on every line — but it is good enough to let you search through your scanned documents for



Documents scanned with Visioneer's PaperPort 3000 appear on the software program's "desktop" on your computer screen.

words and phrases. I use it for searching through scanned business cards.

Although I'm pretty pleased with my Visioneer scanners (I have four of them), they are not without their problems. For two years the PaperPort software was the leading cause of crashes on my Mac. Likewise, I have had numerous problems with the PC software. Each time I called Visioneer tech support, I was told the problem was probably with another program, but that the problem might go away if I reinstalled my PaperPort software.

To be fair, when the problems didn't go away, Visioneer gave me free upgrades to the next version of the software. But if the company knew it had bugs in its programs, I wish Visioneer would have just admitted it and given me the upgrade without the hassle.

Another problem with Visioneer's standard software is that it doesn't integrate very smoothly in a networked environment. Visioneer's software draws a firm line

between documents that are stored on the Visioneer "desktop" and those that are stored in other parts of your computer's file system — or on other parts of your network.

Visioneer does have a system called PaperShare for sharing documents across an office network (\$99 for two users, \$999 for 50), but I would rather see Visioneer's software integrate with my Web server. Then I could drag my files to the Web and let anybody download them. And while you are at it, Visioneer, please let me store my scanned documents directly in Adobe's Acrobat format. That way people won't have to download any special software to view my scanned files.

Visioneer says it is working to overcome many of these problems. Perhaps we'll see changes in the next release.

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