And the winner is . . .

Readers' top choice was Palm Pilot but No. 2, and my top pick, is Newton / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

TWO WEEKS AGO, I looked at four palmtop computers on the market and said I would report back after testing the machines. I also invited readers to share their own palmtop stories and vote for their favorite model.

With all the votes counted, the most popular palmtop computer among readers was the U.S. Robotics Palm Pilot, with Apple Computer Inc.'s Newton coming in a close second. Beyond those two, the only other computer that managed to garner any reader interest was the Psion Series 3c, a nifty 10-ounce organizer that's the size of a checkbook.

Reader Stephen Berczuk argued that it's unfair to compare the Pilot and the Newton. After all, the Pilot is a $300 organizer that fits in your shirt pocket, while the Newton is a $1,000 computer that's got the speed of a desktop machine and is being marketed as a notebook computer replacement.

I disagree. For me, the primary function of both of these machines is to carry my address book and calendar. The Newton performs both functions much better because its software is more sophisticated, and the processor is significantly faster.

The Newton is also a great communicator. Last week I called up Wynd Communications and got a Megahertz AllPoints radio modem for the Newton, allowing me to send and receive e-mail

from the unit without plugging into a phone line. Before the end of this year, we may even see a card that plugs in to the Newton and utilizes its built-in speaker and microphone to transform it into a cellular phone. Pilot can't touch that.

The two main things the Pilot has going for it are the size and the lower cost. Al Weiner, a programmer who is writing a calculator program for the Pilot, says keeping his Pilot in his coat pocket gives it "unconscious portability," meaning he can carry it anywhere, including places he wouldn't carry a Newton.

It's true that the Pilot is great for accessing stored data. Where it falls down is data entry. The Newton recognizes my handwriting, while the Pilot requires that I learn a program called Graffiti.

"My experience differed from yours; I was comfortable with Graffiti within 15 minutes, fluent within a day," wrote Betsy Hanes Perry, who wanted me to tell people that the Graffiti symbols on the reference card

don't work as well as the ones on page 26 of the Palm Pilot's instruction manual.

Well, I followed Perry's advice and learned the better Graffiti alphabet, and I'm still nearly four times faster entering notes on the Newton than on the Pilot.

"The biggest issue for me is value," wrote J. More. "If I wanted something portable to do spreadsheets, faxes, and word processing, I would want the power of a laptop. I just want something to carry my personal data around in, and the Pilot is perfect."

Ironically, spreadsheets, faxes and word processing is where the Newton shines. A few weeks ago I was interviewing Paul Jacobs,

Apple Computer's Newton is a $1,000 computer that has the speed of a desktop machine.

president of Subscriber Products at Qualcomm. Jacobs said that he runs his division with his Newton. He uses a cellular modem and Qualcomm's Eudora for Newton to read his e-mail; he accesses spreadsheets with Newton Works; and he writes memos on the word processor. Unlike a laptop, the Newton runs for more than a week on a set of AA batteries.

Another Newton enthusiast, Nikolaus J. Sucher at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, wanted to put in a plug for Pocketmoney, a program that he says has literally changed his life. Unlike the new Pilot program for filing expense reports, Pocketmoney is a full personal finance system that allows you to track cash, check, and credit-card purchases. Pocketmoney can also upload its data to Quicken or Microsoft Money.

I was hoping that more readers would have had experience with the Windows CE machines. But I got a single e-mail about Microsoft's third venture into the world of palmtop computing. Tom Glickman, president of WMBR, wanted to take a Casio Cassiopeia with him to a business trip in Europe to read his e-mail. Then he discovered that the PC-card modem sucked the AA batteries dry "in less than 10 minutes." He returned the Cassiopeia the next day and took his Thinkpad instead.

A number of readers urged me to include the Psion

organizer in my roundup. "About as close to a laptop as you can get in one pound," wrote Randy Berry, who has used a Psion for three years.

After playing with one for about a week, I've concluded the Psion's case is beautifully designed, but the software needs work. Instead of using a pen, the Psion uses difficult-to-remember keyboard commands, sort of like PCs before the days of Windows. Unlike the other PDAs I tried, I never felt like I was really in control of the unit.

The Psion is also quite slow. But I'm going to play with it some more.
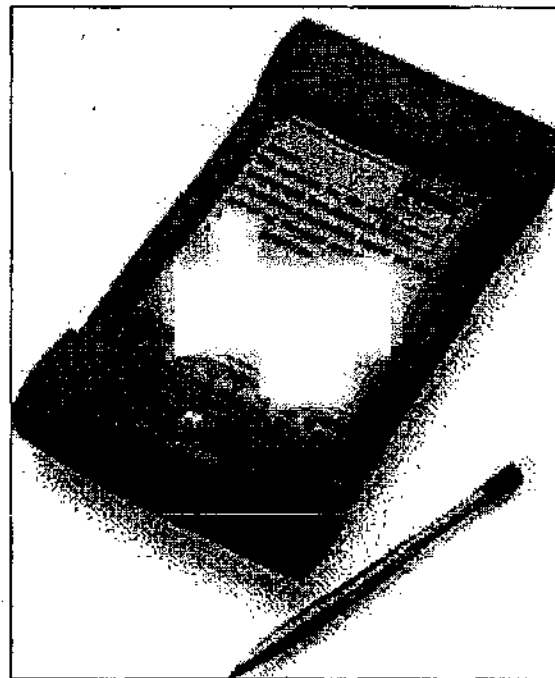
Two people wrote in to express their affection for their Sharp Zaurus organizers. I'm sorry: I borrowed a friend's Zarus and found it to be slow and cumbersome.

The Newton is a magical new computer running a new kind of operating system. Apple doesn't realize it, but Newton is really the company's crown jewel: whereas the MacOS is about to die under the assault from Windows, Newton OS is years ahead anything else in the handheld world.

The real problem is that Newton is getting trapped inside Apple's death spiral and the company may even be looking to sell the division. I think that the best thing that could happen for Newton would be for Apple to sell the division to Microsoft. That would assure a future for this breakthrough technology.

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Lots of great free Newton software can be found at: http://www.panix.com/rom. amug.org/http/newtonsearch.html.

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