

FreeHand Hangs in the Balance Again

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By Robyn Weisman

In the wake of Adobe Systems' proposed acquisition of Macromedia, it may be too soon to tell the fate of Macromedia's vector-drawing program **FreeHand MX**.

For many years, FreeHand and Adobe's Illustrator battled each other for graphics supremacy. While Illustrator (perhaps with Adobe's introduction of its Creative Suite) appears to be on the ascent, FreeHand still has many advocates.

Michael McDaniel, a graphics designer based in Austin, Texas, worked solely in FreeHand until he began working for Austin-based corporate branding and strategies company **fd2s Inc.**, which is an all-Adobe shop on the print end.

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According to McDaniel, he prefers FreeHand because "FreeHand makes files that are a lot smaller, and it seems like an easier and faster environment to draw ... illustrative logos and vector artwork."

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McDaniel added that he and his colleagues "went down kicking and screaming" when his company migrated all of its print work to Adobe Creative Suite.

Neither Adobe Systems Inc. nor Macromedia Inc. have publicly offered any clues about the fate of their respective applications. When asked about the futures of FreeHand and Illustrator, Macromedia declined comment.

"Adobe and Macromedia are committed to serving the needs of our combined customers," said Mark Hilton, senior director of creative pro business unit product management at Adobe. "Until the close of transaction, the companies will continue to operate business as usual. The combined company will not be able to create a joint product roadmap until after the transaction is closed."

For his part, Richard Romano, a writer and analyst at TrendWatch Graphic Arts, said he would rather wait until Adobe reveals its plans for FreeHand's future than indulge in rumor and speculation. "But if I had to take a wild stab, since it's Adobe's party, three guesses which one they'll keep," Romano said.

Chris Swenson, director of software industry analysis at the NPD Group, pointed out that Adobe has acquired FreeHand once before. Back in 1994, when Adobe acquired Aldus, the Federal Trade Commission ruled that the merger could go through only if Adobe divested itself of one of its products to foster competition. Adobe sold FreeHand to Altsys Corp., the company that created FreeHand. About a year later, Macromedia bought out Altsys.

Swenson said that while the 1994 divestment happened during the Clinton administration, the FTC again may require Adobe to divest itself of one of its drawing programs—and given that Illustrator leads in the U.S. market, Adobe again most likely would divest itself of FreeHand.

If the FTC does not make Adobe's acquisition of Macromedia dependent on ridding itself of FreeHand, Adobe has a couple of options, said Romano of TrendWatch Graphic Arts. Adobe could remarket FreeHand as a consumer or corporate tool, similar to what Adobe did with PageMaker after InDesign was released, he said.

Corel's CEO sees opportunity in the merger deal. [Click here](#) to read more.

But a second option is also available to Adobe, Romano said. An option "that would have the virtue of at least *trying* to mollify users of both applications would be to merge them into some sort of uber-program," he said.

"That way, nothing gets discarded per se, although the new program would probably have more in common with other Creative Suite applications than with the older legacy programs, if indeed the new program will be part of a future Creative Suite," Romano said.

If it were up to him, McDaniel said he would like the combined program to be FreeHand with Illustrator's plug-ins.

"Heck, just change the [FreeHand] splash screen to Illustrator's and give it the Creative Suite general key commands" so that it would match up with the rest of Creative Suite, McDaniel said.

But McDaniel seemed well-aware that a rebranded FreeHand probably is not in the cards. "We joke here that the FreeHand-Illustrator combo, if it comes to be, will be called 'Frustrator,'" McDaniel said.

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