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Finally, Microsoft rolls out Windows 95

By STUART GLASCOCK

REDMOND, Wash., Aug. 24 (UPI) – Microsoft Corp. Chairman Bill Gates and TV host Jay Leno put the icing on a multimillion-dollar marketing blitz Thursday as the software giant launched its long-awaited Windows 95 computer operating system.

“We are moving into the next era of computing, with broader communications via e-mail and the online world, dazzling multimedia and games, and richer educational software,” Gates said. “Windows 95 helps open up this new world.”

Gates and Leno blended humor and high-tech wizardry at a carnival-like roll out at Microsoft headquarters that included a tent city, Ferris wheel and thousands of Microsoft employees, customers and journalists.

Leno opened the show for some 2,500 guests with heavy splashes of humor.

He quipped that Gates – a college-dropout computer whiz considered to the world’s wealthiest business man – “is so rich that Ross Perot is his driver.”

The jokes served to punctuate the largest software rollout in history.

Microsoft spread millions of dollars from Seattle to London to Singapore to premiere Windows 95.

Millions of copies of the new software went on sale Thursday at more than 20,000 retail outlets worldwide.

Many computer users queued up late into the night Wednesday to get their hands on the first copies, which some stores began selling at exactly 12:01 a.m. Thursday.

A salesman at London computer Micro Anvika said copies “have been running off the shelves since first thing this morning. It’s been a madhouse.”

Microsoft plans to spend an estimated \$1 billion marketing and advertising Windows 95, an update of the firm’s wildly popular Windows 3.11 operating system.

The company reportedly paid the Rolling Stones \$8 million for the use of the group’s 1981 hit “Start Me Up,” which Microsoft will feature on a series of TV commercials. Gates also plans a four-month tour of Britain.

On Thursday in London, Microsoft paid an unspecified amount for the entire press run of The Times, giving away nearly 1.5 million copies of the paper. Each contained a 25-page Windows 95 supplement.

Microsoft also plans to air half-hour “infomercials” this Sunday and Monday on TV stations in 70 North American cities.

“It’s amazing, the excitement that built around this product introduction,” Gates said.

Microsoft introduced Windows 95 after years of development and millions of dollars of investment – and despite an ongoing federal antitrust probe.

Analysts expect Microsoft to ship 15 million to 20 million copies of the new software in the next few months, forecasting Windows 95 will eventually power perhaps 80 percent of the world’s PCs.

That's roughly the same percentage of PCs that now use Windows 3.11 or earlier versions of Microsoft's system. Microsoft also has deals with PC manufacturers to factory install Windows 95 in most new computers.

But the new software already has its share of problems.

Software pirates around the globe have been reportedly selling bootleg copies of Windows 95 for several days, offering counterfeits for as little as \$2.50 a copy.

Windows 95 most-controversial aspect has been Microsoft's decision to "bundle" software with it for ordering and using the Microsoft Network, the company's new online service.

Some charge Windows 95's expected popularity will help the Microsoft Network crush rival online services like Prodigy and CompuServe.

A Justice Department antitrust probe into the matter remains ongoing, although officials decided earlier this month not to take action that might have held up Windows 95's rollout.

In an apparent pre-emptive move to protect itself from charges of market domination, Microsoft plans to limit the Microsoft Network to just 500,000 subscribers during an unspecified initial period.

Still, Microsoft Chairman Gates has great expectations for his network.

"MSN extends Microsoft's vision of a computer on every desk and in every home by connecting PC users worldwide," Gates said.

Microsoft vows the network will "help people easily get what they want from their on-line experience."

MSN offers such features as full Internet access, global E-mail, a news service, thousands of newsgroups and hundreds of special interest bulletin boards.

The network will also include interactive advertising, with initial sponsors including McDonald's, Kellogg's, Chrysler and others.

"We at Chrysler view a broad relationship with Microsoft as a great opportunity to understand and influence the development of interactive marketing worldwide," Chrysler marketing director Jim Julow said.

Microsoft is offering four plans for MSN subscribers, with monthly and yearly fees that vary depending on frequency of usage.

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