

EDWARD ESBER



Ashton-Tate's CEO 'has finally given the market what it wants' with the fast and flexible new dBase IV software for PCs. Now Esber has ordered major improvements in other key products

After Edward M. Esber Jr. gave a boastful speech at an industry conference earlier this year, a computer newsletter accused him of "swaggering" and behaving like "the General Patton of the PC software industry." Esber, the 35-year-old chief executive of Ashton-Tate, didn't particularly like the comparison. But he acknowledges that there is an element of truth in it: He likes to show up at office parties in a World War II general's uniform. Claims Esber: "I've got the right mix of humility and ego."

Now he's homing in on the right mix of products. Last year, the Torrance (Calif.) company's profits soared 43%, to \$43 million on sales of \$267 million—largely from its industry-leading data-base management program, dBase. Yet several poorly designed products had begun to damage Ashton-Tate's image, and Esber had not introduced a new version of dBase since 1985. Analysts were getting worried. But this February Esber finally unveiled the next generation, dBase IV.

Many think the new program was worth the wait: dBase IV operates 10 times faster than its predecessor and allows a string of personal computers to be linked into a data-sharing network. That's crucial, as it will make office data management far more efficient. Says Bahar Gidwani, an analyst with Kidder, Peabody & Co.: "Esber has finally given the market what it wants."

New recruits His plan is to boost Ashton-Tate's 60% share of the PC data-base market with a gutsy pricing strategy aimed at quickly establishing the product. The vastly superior dBase IV will sell for \$795. That's only \$100 more than dBase III Plus—and owners of that program will be able to upgrade for \$30. But Esber promises that his margins will hold. "I'm not Crazy Eddie," he says. "I don't cut prices too far."

Other new moves should strengthen his hand. He recently joined competitor Microsoft Corp. to distribute a product called SQL Server, which will standardize the way data is retrieved from files. The engineer and Harvard MBA also has lured several top data-base software developers to create most of Ashton-Tate's new products in-house. One notable recruit: computer guru Moshe Zloof, who wrote an ingeniously simple file-retrieval program called Query by Example at International Business Machines Corp. And Esber has ordered major improvements of Ashton-Tate's word processing, graphics, and filing products.

Yet at the same time, competitors such as Oracle Systems Corp. and Cullinet Software Inc. are zeroing in on his data-base management niche. Even IBM is hinting that it has a data-base product in the works for PCs and larger machines. Now Esber is hatching his own plans: He wants to move Ashton-Tate beyond its PC base into minicomputers and mainframes, and he has boosted research and development spending 11% to help. It's a risky strategy, but then nobody expects a World War II general to back away from a challenge.

By Patrick E. Cole in Torrance, Calif.