People in the News: **Edward Esber**

Ashton-Tate's new president is a climber with his sights set on the multitasking mountaintop.

BY CHARLES BERMANT AND DON KENNEDY

You might say Ed Esber is on the fast track. In March of last year he joined the staff at Ashton-Tate, the Culver City, Calif. company that sells dBASE II, dBASE III, and Framework. Eight months later, David Cole had resigned and Edward M. Esber, age 32, was named president and chief executive officer of the 450-employee firm that is generally judged to be among the top three independent soft-ware publishers.

Esber, it should be pointed out, is no Johnny-come-lately interloper into the world of microcomputers; he's not some upstart MBA stepping in to reap the rewards of others' risks. He has toiled in the vineyards of such micro magnates as VisiCorp, Texas Instruments, and IBM. His association with IBM began when he worked on one of the development teams considering production of a person-al computer. Esber's group, incidentally, was not chosen.

Great Expectations

Esber's association with Ashton-Tate extends back only a few months, but already he sounds downright apostolic when he talks about his company. Ask him about Framework, and he'll tell you how good it is. Ask him about dBASE III, and he'll sing its praises. Ask him about dBASE II, and he'll tell you how tough and persevering "that sucker" is. Ask him about Friday, and...well, even apostles can only preach the gospel.

Framework, of course, is currently Ashton-Tate's most closely scrutinized offering. The industry and the press have tended to picture it as the company's weapon in a titanic struggle with Lotus, which is swinging the sword of Symphony. The image is of two of the giants of the software industry battling for market supremacy with their integrated software. So far, it is also an image of Symphony rubbing Framework's nose in the dirt, at least in the area of sales.

Not quite so, says Esber. He admits that Framework has not met "some of the expectations of individuals in our own company." However, he adds that Ashton-Tate's investment in Framework "has been paid back already. We and Lotus have been guilty of not managing the financial expectations of the press, he says. By any conventional measurements, Frame-work and Symphony are both successes."

He also admits that Lotus's product has outsold his own, "probably 2 to 4 times." However, he feels there is a good explanation. "The sales of Symphony are more of a tribute to 1-2-3 than a testament to its own attributes," he says. "It has taken us longer to get our distribution, as Lotus has a distribution advantage. But I expect their bad reviews to eventually catch up with them, as our good reviews will catch up with us."

Esber's recollection of the reviews for the two products may be selective, but he clearly relishes the press coverage of the Symphony-Framework faceoff. He enjoys it so much, in fact, that he takes credit for it. "It is questionable," he says, "if we would have

got such close scrutiny of the products—such public relations value—if that battle had not been orchestrated."

When asked how he could have "orchestrated" a situation that has become the cover story of most major computer publications this year, he smiles somewhat sheepishly and asks, "Well, who announced later? Who created the drama?" The answer, needless to say, is Ashton-Tate.

If "drama" does indeed describe the competition between the two products, then the first act belongs to Symphony. Esber, however, expects a change of fortune for Framework by the time the curtain sets on the next act. He points to the fact that 1-2-3 replaced VisiCalc as the best-selling spreadsheet and feels that it sets a precedent for his belief that Ashton-Tate's integrated product can still be-come number one.

The tricky part for Esber, of course, is not merely becoming number one in integrated software against Lotus, but battling other forces', such as IBM's entry into the software market and the movement toward multi-tasking environments that will render integrated software unnecessary.

Water Works

Earlier this year, IBM created a splash in the software waters with the introduction of its Personal Decision series and Business Management series software; modular-style programs based on minicomputer and mainframe code already in use. Esber dismisses IBM's effort with a wave of his hand. "I am glad it has chosen products in the latter stages of their life as a target for its entry into the market," he says.

Windows are dismissed almost as derisively. "How many times do you not work full screen?" he asks. "The only time windows are used is when a software publisher wants to demonstrate his program and show you his spreadsheet and word processing programs side by side. The reality is it's only used when some software vendor is displaying it."

Speaking of TopView, he says, "IBM is moving its operating systems in the direction of Apple's pioneering. It's not important to support TopView. Nothing will force people to use TopView, unless it is bundled with the machines. But bundling doesn't work because people don't like to be locked in to software."

Market Matters

Of course, all the emphasis on Ashton-Tate as an underdog in the Symphony-Framework war paints an unbalanced picture of the company that has been the top dog in database management since such pro-grams became a staple on the PC. dBASE II and now dBASE III are the standards against which all other databases have been judged and Ashton-Tate has shown no sign of losing its edge in that market.

When speaking of Frame-work, Ed Esber says he knows how to become number one. Just as importantly, with dBASE II and III he claims he also understands how to remain number one. For this, he lists four rules: "Keep your product competitive. Keep listening to your dealers. Never get too arrogant. Never believe your own b.s."

From a man who talks about orchestrating the media and managing their expectations, that final rule may well give pause as to just how many grains of salt should be taken with Ed Esber's words. However, one thing seems certain. He's on a track that is fast and certainly seems headed towards the top part of the heap.   ■