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Techies gear up for Macworld

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Macsense Connectivity plans to debut revised product first unveiled last year By Francine Brevetti, BUSINESS WRITER

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THE 20TH Macworld Conference & Expo begins today at San Francisco's Moscone Center and the sponsors, IDG World Expo, expect tens of thousands of participants to the event that draws professionals and amateurs alike. "This show gives a view of where the Mac community is today, a vibrant community," composed of those who use Apple products in their professional lives as well as individual users and hobbyists, said Warwick Davies, group vice president for IDG World Expo.

Steve Jobs, Apple Computer's chieftain, draws enormous crowds of people who struggle to get a front-row seat for his keynote speech that usually announces a raft of new products.

Davies said the same pent-up expectations were building for this event but he could give no foretaste of Jobs' message.

"Apple keeps its cards close to the chest. That's the greatest attraction," said Davies.

The conference's five different tracks will focus on the MAC OS X, its new operating system called Panther; tutorials for new Mac applications; visual and graphic software; video tools; and advice on troubleshooting and debugging Mac products. Participants will be able to pick and choose from an a la carte list rather than to commit to a particular track.

An arcade on the exhibit floor will expose the newest game titles running on Power Mac G5s and 17-inch iMacs.

Local companies such as Adobe Systems, beezwax, Discreet, **Macsense Connectivity**, Netopia, and Stalker Software will feature their wares in the exhibit hall.

Macsense Connectivity of Burlingame will debut its first product at this show -- for the second time. Operations director Howard Y. Cheng explained that Macsense introduced its HomePod at Macworld a year ago. But based on feedback from participants, the company decided to redesign the product rather than ship it.

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The HomePod is a wireless device (based on 802.11b technology) that allows music to be streamed from an iMac computer to any room in the house.

Whereas the handheld device Apple produces called iPod has a hard drive and makes duplicates of music to be carried, with the HomePod, music rests on the computer and is streamed elsewhere by the device.

"Now HomePod is a freestanding unit. Before (last year's show), it was lying down so you couldn't see the LCD screen. Now it's got a built-in speaker so you don't have to rely on the stereo speakers in house," said Cheng of the advances the company made since displaying the device at the 2003 show.

"We've finally finished it so that we can ship it after the show," he said.

Meanwhile, 10-year-old Stalker Software of Mill Valley has been exhibiting at Macworld almost since the company's inception. Stalker provides e-mail systems for large companies, such as telecom companies, Internet service providers, universities and schools worldwide.

Director of sales and marketing Ali Liptrot said this year was important for the software company to exhibit because of the adoption of Apple's Panther operating system.

"We're seeing a trend. More and more of our customers are coming to Mac OS X, to Panther. We are the strongest mail system for Panther," she said.

While Apple supplies a lower-end mail system, Stalker's flagship product CommuniGate Pro is an "alternative for more functionality and scalability," according to Liptrot, and will be demonstrated at the exhibit hall.

Macworld is a biannual event, occurring once a year in San Francisco and once on the East Coast. The Panther operating system was unveiled in the summer in New York.

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