Thin client's fat rewards

By STEVE CREEDY

ASKING what you get when you mix accounting with thin clients may sound like the start of a bizarre riddle, but officials at Sydney company Sapphire Software are hoping such a combination will mean a foot in the door of lucrative overseas markets.

Sapphire officials believe they are the first to introduce an accounting-finance application with a thin client, which allows staff to use a Web browser to access database and data-entry functions.

The latest version of Sapphire, launched at a conference last week, has a new sales and support structure and lower pricing which includes a five-user licence costing less than $1000.

Company spokesman John Adams said it was the first product of its type to introduce full access through Internet and intranet technology.

Clients would be able to design their own interface for the product using a Web browser or productivity suites such as Office 97, he said.

Combined with Sapphire's other features, the new product meant the company was introducing technology "that's really got a quite an awesome suite of functionality at an incredibly competitive price".

"What we're really aiming at is the export market."

Mr Adams said Sapphire was releasing its new version 5.0 package through retailer Harvey Norman and had appointed Express Bookkeeping, a group of franchised accountants, to handle support.

"There's about 180 of them, and they've all had a minimum of a week's training on the product," he said.

"There's going to be three or four of those guys allocated to every single store, and they're going to do pre-sales and post-sales support."

Mr Adams said the company believed the franchise support system had several advantages over traditional telephone support, including a better rapport with clients.

"They're given a card of someone who lives or works in their local area — whether it be Melbourne or Brisbane, or Perth or New Zealand — and there are local people who can support the product and help install it," he said.

"That's a unique model. It's the first time that it's happened in the marketplace."

Sapphire's financial-management software includes a full range of functions, such as accounts receivable, general ledger, sales and purchase orders, inventory, time sheets and payroll.

Mr Adams said it was aimed at small- to medium-large businesses and because it used a relational database, could handle as many as four billion records a file.

That meant it was fully scaleable from single users to companies with 50 users, each processing 200 to 300 transactions a day.

It was also a 32-bit technology specifically compiled to take advantage of Pentium and PowerPC technology such as multi-threading.

Sapphire shines in financials

By Dominique Jackson

"To do for financial management systems what Apple Macintosh did for personal computers," is the goal of Sapphire Software, a nine person, Sydney-based application developer that has been beating the big applications vendors in winning local deals.

Sapphire develops Sapphire Client/Server 4.0, a financial management systems for the one-to-200 concurrent user market. The product's unique feature is that it can run concurrently on Windows NT and Macintosh. "You'd be amazed how many companies have the graphics/marketing running on Macs and the financials on Windows," said John Adams, of Sapphire Software. "That has been a huge selling feature for us," he added.

Another selling point for Sapphire is the product's price which, at $495 for a single user and $3000

per concurrent user for the enterprise version, is considerably less than competitors such as Oracle and SAP, whose 50-user applications would cost more than $1 million, according to Adams.

Sapphire staff and affiliates have been beating big vendors for local deals.

As a result, many of Sapphire's clients are budget-conscious government sites, such as National Standards, or medical research institutions reliant on grants and donations, such as the Garvan Institute.

The only market Sapphire is not going after at the moment is extremely large companies with thousands of users. However, the next version of the product, featuring TCP/IP support and full data synchronisation with Office 97 integration, will allow the product to handle larger numbers of users, Adams said.

Short implementation time is an additional benefit. The Garvan Institute's implementation, which began with 20 users and is moving to 150, was finished in six weeks.

The first version of Sapphire was released in 1987. Written in C++, the application was developed by Peter Tippet and Paul Beard, who continue to head up development.

Sapphire's installed base numbers over 600 sites in Australia, including Australian Red Cross, NSW Law Society. The product has begun to be adopted by accounting firms such as Mason Voukidis.