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Comdex Geeks and Glitz Computer trade show is collision of 2 lifestyles

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Coty Alexander spoke in a voice barely above a whisper, and she was hawking some pretty obscure technology, but she didn't have any trouble drawing visitors to the T.S. MicroTech booth at the Comdex computer trade show that ended here yesterday.

Her secret was in the platinum hair, the distinctive beauty mark and the low-cut white dress. What computer nerd could resist a pitch from Marilyn Monroe?

"I've handed these flyers out before just being myself, and they say no, but they'll take them from me because I'm Marilyn," Alexander said.

Comdex is the ultimate collision of Silicon Valley geek chic and cheesy Las Vegas glitz. Taxicabs and billboards that once promoted exotic dancers are this week advertising Tektronix printers and all the "hot" goings on at the Conexant booth.

That's not to say that sex is hidden from view. Shameless hucksters hand out raunchy flyers advertising the city's seemingly endless array of strippers and hookers. That's smart marketing: It's not too risky to guess that three-quarters of those attending Comdex are men.

The real issue for Ziff-Davis, the unit of Softbank that runs Comdex, is whether the show is losing some of its luster. The buzz at Comdex was that fewer people attended, while industry leaders like Intel, Dell Computer, Compaq Computer and IBM did not have booths on the show floor.

The Las Vegas Review Journal reported that hotel rooms were much easier to come by this year, and the Comdex price-gouging that had gone on in the past -- with rates even tripling during Comdex week -- was not in evidence. Part of that may be because people come only for one or two days of the show, rather than the duration. In addition, Las Vegas keeps building thousands of new hotel rooms at splashy casinos like Bellagio and New York New York.

William Sell, the general manager of Ziff-Davis' Comdex Group, staunchly defended the show as on target in both corporate and individual attendance. He expects 220,000 people to have passed through the show, he said, and he noted that Intel and others were

still present with signs, keynote speeches, meeting rooms and hospitality suites.

CULTURE CLASH: The computer industry does not represent the typical visitor to Las Vegas. Cabbies grumbled that techies are lousy tippers. Show attendees would rather do business, or debate the merits of Windows NT versus Unix, than blow their hard-earned stock options at the craps table.

"This is the week a lot of casinos do renovations," said Mary Ellen Collins, Ziff-Davis public relations manager.

A croupier at the Treasure Island craps table said, "The joke about these computer guys is, they come to Comdex with one shirt and one \$20 bill, and they don't change either one of them." (A computer reseller gambling at his table exclaimed, "That's so true! Have you smelled some of these guys?")

Outside the Las Vegas Convention Center one night, attendees filed past Fred Wufka, pastor of Holy Ghost Church in Las Vegas, who held a small basket collecting money for the city's homeless.

As the programmers and resellers at Comdex walked past him on their way to lavish parties and expense-account dinners, were they generous to his cause?

"They're people and they're doing OK," Wufka said, glancing at the meager collection in his basket. "They do their best, I guess."

THE URGE TO CONVERGE: Almost as notable as the absence of Intel and IBM booths were the massive setups from companies like Panasonic, Sony, Hitachi and Toshiba. Many of their offerings show how consumer electronics and computers are inching toward each other.

Even a veteran PC watcher like Michael Slater, editor of Sebastopol's Microprocessor Report, noted, "The things that were the most interesting were not the PCs. It's the consumer electronics show."

Little machines that hook up to the Internet, or communicate with each other, or bring television to the PC -- or vice versa -- were all the rage this year. Fueled by the PalmPilot's popularity, tiny, lightweight portable devices that "allow you to do e-mail in the back of a taxicab" have proliferated, Ziff-Davis' Sell said.

GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES: Coty Alexander, the Marilyn impersonator, said she had much better luck getting an acting career going when she left her native Los Angeles and moved to Las Vegas a few years ago. "I made more money as an actress in my first year here than I ever did in L.A.," she said. "I got a starring role in a show, and I'm on billboards and taxicabs."

She stars as Madonna in a show at the Stratosphere casino. Playing Madonna lets her show off her bad side, she said, while as Marilyn she "conjures up some specialness" that people respond to.

Playing Marilyn, Alexander earns \$500 to \$800 a day at booths like T.S. Microtech's, and she can fetch \$5,000 for singing a few songs at a party.

The hardest part of the job is the blisters she gets after standing for eight hours in her white high heels.

At the T.S. Microtech booth, she handed out flyers touting TSM's fan cards and Point of Sale PCs. What could she tell visitors about those items? "Nothing at all," she said. "And that's the way I like it."

SPOOK DISPLAYS: Sceptre Technologies lured people to its booth with a contest to win the most popular freebie at this year's show: bright stuffed Komodo dragons that roar when squeezed. Sceptre makes computer monitors, and the dragons are monitor lizards -- get it?

One type of Sceptre monitor, for use on a laptop, is an "exclusive view" screen. You can't see a thing on the screen until you put on a special pair of glasses. Computer execs could use it to keep nosy airplane seatmates from stealing trade secrets -- and some other organizations find it useful, too.

"We're actually selling them to the CIA," said Simon Chen, marketing manager for the City of Industry (Los Angeles County) company.

IN THE BOX: Proving that old maxim that no one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American people, the folks at Agfa earned "top-of-mind" awareness for their products by handing out cardboard boxes that could be worn as hats.

Michael Scoggin of Las Cruces, N.M., was one of many show attendees roaming the halls with a box atop his head.

"I'm just here to collect free stuff," Scoggin said, showing off dozens of product-promoting buttons. "People give people like me free things to wear."

COMDEX BY THE NUMBERS: The trade show featured 2,400 exhibitors representing 131 countries, with two-thirds from North America, Ziff-Davis' Collins said. They occupied 2.5 million square feet of floor space -- the equivalent of 510 football fields.

That floor space cost about \$50 a square foot, which brings the indoor real estate alone to \$125 million. That doesn't include what it cost companies to set up the booths or to send employees to staff them.

Although that figure was not available, Collins said the show, Las Vegas' biggest convention, brings \$405 million into the city. And Sell said annualized audits show that \$1.6 billion in business is transacted either at the show or as a result of contacts established or renewed at the show.

THE RULES OF COMDEX: As with any show the size of Comdex, there have to be rules. But the attendees don't have to like those rules.

One unbreakable rule was that no one but exhibitors could go on the show floor until 10 a.m. The guards did not rely on their own watches, but waited for the all-clear to be broadcast. One morning, the clock approached 10:10 a.m., and the mob waiting for floor access grew angry, but the opening bell was not forthcoming.

``Who's running this show?" one wag asked. ``Amtrak?"

A rule closing the press room at 6 p.m. was just as rigidly enforced, never mind the deadlines. As reporters were ousted from phones and laptops, one muttered, ``This must be the only place in Las Vegas that closes at 6 p.m."

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