

### Digital Sails in With a Super-Convention

By John Wilke  
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**D**igital Equipment Corp. wants everyone to know that its ship has come in. Not just any ship would do, though, for a company as hot as Digital.

Perhaps to make sure no one misses the point, the rising star of the computer industry has hired the grand ocean liner Queen Elizabeth 2 and a second cruise ship, the Star/Ship Oceanic.

But this armada, steaming into Boston Harbor Sept. 8, isn't going anywhere. Docked alongside the World Trade Center, the liners will become floating hotels for DECWorld, a nine-day extravaganza likely to be the largest convention the city has ever seen. Running through Sept. 18, the show will draw as many as 50,000 people, including 10,000 Digital employees, to century-old Commonwealth Pier.

Don't put it on your calendar, though. If you haven't been invited, you can't go. And it really isn't a trade show, Digital insists: The guest list is an international cross-section of corporate computer executives and company presidents, each with a personal agenda tailored by a Digital sales representative.

"We're sold out," jokes an unnaturally calm Dallas Kirk, the event's impresario and logistics chief. Kirk figures he'll need about five miles of computer cabling, several hundred thousand dollars worth of air conditioning, and maybe a million passenger-miles of shuttle bus service to and from area hotels.

Digital refuses to disclose what it is spending for the affair, but Kirk concedes it is a "major element" of the company's annual marketing budget. Just rebuilding the pier to accommodate the cruise ships will cost nearly \$1 million.

John Palm, Gannett Corp.'s information-systems chief, is the kind of customer Digital

wants to reach. Like a select few hundred others, Palm will get a stateroom on the QE2. Gannett, which publishes USA Today and more than 90 other newspapers, has several Digital computers, but buys most of its equipment from IBM.

Palm insists he is "just going to kick the tires." But he's also shopping for software that helps run newspaper circulation and advertising, a purchase of several hundred thousand dollars. At DECWorld, he'll talk to third-party vendors selling software built around Digital computers.

"Digital claims it has made a strong commitment to serve the media industry, and I'm going to Boston to test the depth of that commitment," Palm says.

Nynex Corp., another big Digital customer, plans to send a couple of key engineers. "These events are invaluable to keep pace with the state of the art," says Toby Squitieri, who manages Nynex's quarter-billion-dollar annual budget for computer products and services.

Even arch-rival IBM is expected. "I'm sure they'll slip in somehow, just to see what's new," says Digital's Kirk. "They certainly weren't invited."

Marc G. Schulman, computer-industry analyst for Salomon Bros. Inc., says the show offers "an unparalleled degree of marketing leverage." He expects Digital to take advantage of its guests' undivided attention to unveil major new products, including a successor to the brisk-selling MicroVAX II line of computers, and a network-management device.

The new products could have an impact across the industry, analysts and industry executives predict, forcing pricing and product reactions from Digital's many Boston-area competitors.

"This is really Digital's year," says Cathy Hule, who follows the company for International Data Corp. "They're in the limelight. This show comes at a crucial time."

Chief executive Kenneth Olsen, the master of ceremonies, will launch DECWorld with a touch you might expect from a firm that built its success on the seamless interaction of computers: He'll plug in a huge computer network, woven together just for show, that connects more than 400 Digital computers across the exhibition hall and - via satellite - around the world.

During the show hands-on seminars will demonstrate Digital's solutions to problems in a variety of industries, with on-site simulations of industrial and office environments ranging from financial services to an auto parts assembly line.

More than 100 third-party vendors will also show their wares. Among them will be Cullinet Software Inc. of Westwood.

"The show lets us get Cullinet's message across to a huge, highly receptive audience," says Tom Corr of Cullinet. He says Digital is increasingly working with its third-party vendors, "because good software helps sell computers."

Digital executives say the idea for DECWorld originated about five years ago, after Digital held a company-wide sales meeting as a kind of pep rally to show products still under development and revive marketing efforts.

"Business was tough, the competition was eating our lunch and sales people were dispirited," Kirk recalls. "We had a kind of motivational meeting, and it was a real success." When someone suggested that customers should have been there, Kirk recalls, DECWorld was born.

Originally, domestic and international customers attended separate shows, with foreign buyers gathering in Cannes, France, for a smaller DECville. This year's Boston show combines both efforts, while next year's combined event will return to Cannes.

Is it worth all the expense and effort? "It's a bargain, relative to what it would cost to make sales calls on all these clients," Kirk insists. "We see it as a big customer visit."

Though DECWorld is easily the most important event of the year for Digital, it's also big business for Boston.

Figuring from a 10-day head count of 50,000, the event could pump as much as \$55 million into the local economy, says Mark McDermott, vice president of the Greater Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau. The only event that came close to DECWorld's expected size was a 1984 Shriner's convention, which also drew an estimated 50,000 persons, over four days, McDermott says.

"This event is tremendously important for the city," he says. Massport spokeswoman Lana Razban agrees, calling DECWorld "a wonderful chance to prove Boston can efficiently handle a major, world-class event."

