Are you a prosumer? Take this hand quiz

By Scott Kirsner  |  June 13, 2005

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At 2 a.m. on a weekday, can you usually be found in the basement, making "one more" edit to your latest video before going to sleep?

Are you convinced that upgrading from an 8 megapixel camera to a 16 megapixel camera will undoubtedly transform you into the next Ansel Adams?

Do you devise complex international money-laundering schemes to conceal from your spouse the amount of money you spend on new audio effects software?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may be part of a growing consumer technology sector.

Prosumers are passionate about the technology they use for their creative pursuits. "How much time do you have?" replies Dr. Cyril Mazansky, when asked about his equipment. Mazansky is a radiologist who is also a devoted nature photographer. "I could happily talk to you about this all afternoon." For technology companies, they're tough customers, more sophisticated and demanding than garden-variety consumers, but less experienced and free-spending than professionals.

The word "prosumer" was coined in 1979 by the futurist Alvin Toffler. Initially, it referred to an individual who would be involved in designing the things she purchased (a mash-up of the words "producer" and "consumer.") These days, the term more often refers to a segment of users midway between consumers and professionals. This kind of prosumer doesn't necessarily earn money by making music, videos, or photos, but is still willing to invest in more serious hardware and software than the typical dabbler, and spend more time using it.

Prosumers don't necessarily embrace the term. They're just using the best technology they can find. But don't call them hobbyists, either.

Mazansky is a prototypical prosumer. Though he prefers to shoot his pictures on film, he owns a flatbed scanner for importing the images into his Macintosh G5 computer, where he uses the latest version of Adobe PhotoShop to manipulate them. He makes prints on an Epson 2200 printer, but like most prosumers, he's itching to get the newest model. "They've just announced the release of the 2400, which I'll be purchasing in a few months," Mazansky says. "It has eight ink colors, and it can do more sophisticated black-and-white imagery than my current printer."

Mazansky has a website, and his photos line the halls of the radiology department at Caritas Carney Hospital, where he works.

Prosumers are usually space-constrained, pressing spare rooms of their homes into double duty. Rob Lee's music studio is in the basement of his West Medford home, "next to the fridge and the litter box," he says. "The surroundings are Spartan, but if you have headphones on and you're looking at the screen, you don't mind the smell."

Lee, a saxophone player, is the plant manager at Fayerweather Street School in Cambridge, where he also teaches an after-school music group. For one of his recent projects, he used software from Boston-based Cakewalk to create an audio party invitation for his son Tim's seventh birthday.

"We just said, 'Wouldn't it be cool if we made up a song,' " Lee says. "My son pretty much improvised the lyrics over a music track that I created, and the song had all the party details in it." Invites got a copy of the song on a CD. "We've been accused of raising the bar for future party invitations," Lee says.

Prosumers use the Internet to communicate, and pine after the latest gear. In the early 1990s, Cambridge resident Philip Greenspun started the site Photo.net, where photographers can post their work and their opinions about equipment.

Money isn't usually a central goal for prosumers. "What a photographer earns is so minimal," says Greenspun, a retired entrepreneur who teaches at MIT and flies his plane around the country with his Sayoyed. "It's not really worth trying to make money at it. The satisfaction I get is that other people are learning something from it." Greenspun adds
that he also allows anyone to reproduce his work, so long as they credit him and provide a link to his website. "Nonprofits and government organizations often use the photos, which is nice," he says.

Haik Sahakian, who develops websites at Fidelity Investments, is only too happy to hand out copies of his latest DVD, produced with a $400 Sony video camera and a copy of Adobe Premiere editing software. It's a traditional yule log video but it's "the first one with director's commentary as an optional feature," Sahakian notes proudly.

While Sahakian describes his video-making as a sideline, some prosumers harbor the desire to eventually go pro.

Dawn Morrissey, a recent graduate of Emerson College, has a day job at McLean Hospital, managing a lab that does research into Alzheimer's disease. "You have to pay the bills," she says. But last year, she helped make a short documentary about a chili contest in the Fenway. This summer she's planning to shoot more video footage with her secondhand digital camera, and she's working on a screenplay. "I've pitched the idea to Robert Redford and Gabriel Byrne," she says.

The prosumer market is increasingly important for tech companies. Reaching prosumers was one motivating factor behind Avid Technologies' $462 million purchase of Pinnacle Systems, which makes video editing software for prosumers, in March. "We're really focused on professionals with the Avid line," explains spokesman Carter Holland. "The whole rationale behind the Pinnacle purchase is to extend that to people who aren't professionals."

But prosumers are an unruly bunch. They don't always use the hardware or software that manufacturers expect them to. (Some prosumers, for instance, use Avid Xpress DV editing software, which, according to Holland, is intended for professionals.)

Cakewalk offers various levels of pricing, from $99 to $599, for its primary product, an audio editing platform called Sonar. Many prosumers gravitate toward the more expensive levels. "Musicians want to use what their heroes are using," explains Michael Hoover, vice president of products and marketing at Cakewalk. "It's like how everyone wants to play a Fender Stratocaster because Eric Clapton does."

But prosumers may not want all the features of software designed for a pro, and they may require more support when using it, says Bill Gardner, chief executive of Wave Arts, a Lexington company that makes audio effects software that integrates with software from companies like Cakewalk.

Gardner reckons he's selling to an increasing number of prosumers. However, trying to figure out who is a prosumer and who is a professional is probably a fool's errand, he says. "Our customers talk about being in the studio working on a project, and that could mean their basement or a multimillion-dollar facility somewhere," he says. "Their client could be a friend, and when they talk about cutting a disc, that could mean burning a CD on a laptop."

Prosumers already have a nice assortment of tools to choose from. What they need are better ways to distribute their stuff, aside from simply handing it to friends on a CD or DVD, or posting it to a website. As music marketplaces like Apple's iTunes Music Store open up to individual producers of songs and podcasts, and as video marketplaces evolve (two to watch are Cambridge-based Brightcove Networks and California's Open Media Network), prosumers may be able reach larger audiences and potentially even turn a profit.

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