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OFFICE IMAGING PRODUCTS 2002: BLI'S PICKS OF THE YEAR

During the testing period for this year's awards, which ran from the spring of 2001 to the spring of 2002, more than 100 multifunctional products, fax machines and printers were subjected to BLI's rigorous in-house evaluation. The battery of tests includes an extensive durability test during which each unit is run at the manufacturer's maximum recommended monthly volume. In addition to assessing reliability, the tests are designed to evaluate such critical factors as misfeed frequency, copy and print quality, copy and print productivity, ease of use and economy, as well as connectivity issues such as feedback to workstations, administrative utilities, print drivers and multitasking.

As is the case every year, some models performed below

the bar in one or more areas, while others clearly excelled. While many products performed well overall this past year, a number stood out from the rest as clearly superior to their competition. Each year, with its "Pick of the Year" awards, BLI gives special recognition in each category to the products that provided the most outstanding performances in the laboratory, as well as the vendor whose overall product line was demonstrated to be the best by virtue of its cumulative test results (of course, only units tested by BLI in its lab are eligible to receive awards). The purpose of these awards is to better guide equipment buyers in their acquisition decisions.

Among the winners is...

Sharp AR-M350N IMAGER

Outstanding Segment 3 Multifunctional Imaging System, 2002

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Sharp AR-M350N IMAGER

Without a doubt the most productive unit tested in its range, the Sharp AR-M350N IMAGER has won a 2002 BLI "Pick of the Year" award for "Outstanding Segment 3 Multifunctional Imaging System." A well-designed unit that demonstrated superior overall performance in BLI's three-month evaluation, the configuration tested, which comes standard with the controller and the 10/100BaseT network interface card and was tested with the optional PostScript 3 and scan kits, required one service call and four PMs (one of which was a mini-PM) during its 300,000-impression test, for a Mean Impressions Between Service (MIBS) rate of 60,000 impressions, and four misfeeds were logged, for an impressive misfeed rate of one misfeed per 75,000 impressions. Ken Nardone, BLI manager of product testing,

pointed out that while overall efficiency rates are above average in simplex copy mode, they are well above average in both duplex copy modes (1:2 and 2:2) and in both simplex and duplex print modes. In fact, its overall effi-

ciency rates are the highest of any Segment 3 model tested in all duplex copy and duplex print modes. Furthermore, first-page-out time in print mode is also faster than that of most other tested Segment 3 models. Contributing to its excellent efficiency in copy mode is the unit's optional 50-sheet duplex single-pass feeder, which features dual scan heads to simultaneously scan both sides of an original in a single pass.

Contributing to its overall productivity is the unit's ease of use, which was excellent both from its intuitive and very legible touch-sensitive control panel and from the desktop. BLI test technicians praised the well-designed print drivers, which automatically detect the device's configuration and feed the information back to workstation users, eliminating the need for an administrator to manually specify the configuration. Conveniently, the drivers include all the features necessary for most typical jobs on the main screen. Moreover, paper supply and size gauges are accessible directly from the driver. Also contributing to its good feedback to PC workstations are pop-up error messages and job completion notification. In addition, the system offers Remote e-Mail Diagnostics, whereby it can be set up to generate e-mail messages detailing the machine's condition on a scheduled or event-driven basis to a designated user in-house or to a dealer or service technician. Procedures for replacing the toner cartridge, loading paper, removing misfeeds and adjusting the size of the optional paper sources were also easy.

The Sharp AR-M350N IMAGER also produced output that received BLI's highest image quality rating for all types of output produced in the tests in both copy and print modes. Another strength of the Sharp AR-M350N demonstrated in testing was its multitasking, with the number of copy and/or print jobs able to be sent to the device while another job was in progress limited only by memory capacity. The unit's 64-MB standard memory, which is shared

for copying and printing, can be expanded to 320 MB and augmented by a 5-GB hard drive.

BLI test technicians also praised the unit's easy-to-use and well-designed scan function, as tested with the AR-NS2 Network Scanner Expansion Kit. Scan destinations, which may be e-mail destinations, users' desktops, groups, FTP server locations, or, if the unit is equipped with the fax option, fax destinations, can easily be programmed via either the Network Scanner Tool software or the Web utility and are automatically downloaded to the control panel as selectable options, with various attributes assigned to each destination. To scan, users may select from among the preprogrammed destinations or may enter a destination on the fly using the QWERTY touchscreen keypad. The very-easy-to-use and full-featured Sharpdesk software, a 10-user license for which is bundled with the scan option, allows users to view, edit, copy and print their scans and incorporates OCR capability

The SharpAR-M350N IMAGER, which has a base suggested retail price of \$6,995, is offered with a choice of output options, including a 1,000-sheet saddle-stitch finisher that staples up to 50 sheets and can be configured with optional three-hole punch capability, and an eight-bin mailbox/stacker. Noteworthy is that for added flexibility the AR-M350N can be configured with both a finisher and the mailbox simultaneously, as was the case in BLI's testing. Also offered is a two-tray finisher. While not configured on the test unit, fax functionality is optional and features a 33.6-Kbps modem with JBIG compression, 2 MB of standard memory (expandable to 10 MB), multi-access, Internet fax, confidential transmission and reception, and broadcasting to up to 300 destinations.

Clearly a stand-out performer in Segment 3, the Sharp AR-M350N IMAGER is highly recommended by BLI for monthly volumes ranging from 11,000 to 50,000 impressions.

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