EContent Decision-Maker Review: Adobe FrameMaker 7.0

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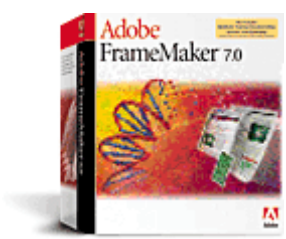
November 2002 | FrameMaker 7.0 is Adobe's enterprise authoring and multichannel publishing solution. FrameMaker runs on Windows 98 and above, Mac OS 9.0 and above, and various flavors of UNIX including Sun Solaris, HP-UX, and IBM-AIX. FrameMaker 7.0 lists for $799 and combines two previously distinct products, now accessible via a switchable preference: FrameMaker (formerly $799 list) and FrameMaker+SGML (formerly $1499). To make it clear which product it refers to, Adobe calls the former FrameMaker "unstructured FrameMaker" and its FrameMaker+SGML "structured FrameMaker." Both product versions, however, are in effect structured; managing highly structured documents has long been one of FrameMaker's strengths. The difference is that the unstructured mode is proprietary to Adobe, while the structured mode works with industry-standards SGML and XML. FrameMaker's support of XML, a Web-capable subset of SGML, is new in version 7.0. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), developers of XML, released the original XML standard in February 1998. This review emphasizes FrameMaker's XML capabilities rather than the older (and less used) SGML standard.

Adobe FrameMaker 7.0

Company:
Adobe Systems Inc.

Purpose:
Authoring and Publishing

Reviewer's View:
Buy this product if you want to move to a structured authoring environment and you know your SGML or XML model will be an industry standard or stable. There will be some knowledge transfer from unstructured FrameMaker to



Starting Price: $799

structured FrameMaker, however there will also be a learning curve.

The ability to use FrameMaker in both unstructured and structured modes can benefit an organization needing traditional print or Acrobat publishing as well as a segue to XML publishing. Adobe has designed FrameMaker's menus and functions to look and work similarly in both structured and unstructured modes.

Starting with the 7.0 release, Adobe offers a server edition of FrameMaker with a list price of $7,999. The server edition has the same features as found in the desktop edition and provides the convenience of managing FrameMaker via a server. The server edition can also provide a means for database publishing.

FrameMaker's approach to working with XML and SGML is a hybrid approach, requiring customizations to associate internal FrameMaker structures with the elements and attributes that are standard in XML. Two such mechanisms are the Element Definition Document (EDD) and Read/Write rules. EDDs are FrameMaker's internal representation of the structures expressed in an XML document model called a DTD. Read/Write rules define relationships between every XML element and attribute to corresponding document objects such as tables, graphics, and footnotes. Structured FrameMaker uses Read/ Write rules for importing and exporting files. If your organization changes its XML model, then a developer must modify the EDD and Read/Write rules to reflect those changes.

IN THE DETAILS

FrameMaker 7.0 comes bundled with Quadralay's WebWorks standard edition, a tool for producing HTML (optionally styled with cascading stylesheets), outputs to MS Reader and Palm Reader, and XML styled either with cascading stylesheets or XSL, the family of W3C XML formatting and transformation standards. FrameMaker's major new features are:

Full support for XML "round tripping," assuring valid XML both into and from FrameMaker.

Support for three sample XML applications: DocBook 4.1, xDocbook 4.1.2, and one of the three XHTML DTDs; CSS Export, which allows automatic generation of CSS style definitions for XML files; expanded support for SVG graphics—another Adobe strength—as either raster or pass-through graphics in their original XML renditions; ability to generate Acrobat 5 "tagged PDF." This can enhance document accessibility by allowing flexible reflows of text on a broad range of reader devices; support for Unicode, 8- and 16-bit UTF characters. This can eliminate the need to buy special Asian-language printing devices; and extensive support for non-English fonts, for example: double-byte for Japanese, simplified and traditional Chinese, Korean, as well as many European and Scandinavian languages.

There are no XML analysis and design tools bundled with FrameMaker. To design XML

stylesheets or DTDs, you must purchase separate XML suites such as Altova's XML Spy or Tibco's Turbo XML. There is also no FrameMaker integration with those tools.

Datalogics offers a set of products collectively called "FrameLink" that integrate FrameMaker with Documentum. Similar integrations are available with other major content management systems such as Lightspeed Astoria (formerly Chrystal Astoria), and the XyEnterprise Content@ system. The Windows and Macintosh FrameMaker editions also support the Web Distributed Authoring and Versioning protocol. Any content management system supporting WebDAV could also provide easy integration with FrameMaker.

I found integration between the two FrameMaker "modes" to be a bit rough; the user manual sometimes refers simply to "FrameMaker," leaving it to the reader to determine whether the reference is to the unstructured or structured modes. The product also didn't have an out-of-the-box tutorial guiding you through the use of either mode. Still, there is a lot of value in FrameMaker and I expect these minor shortcomings will be fixed in future releases.

Key Features at a Glance

Round-tripping between FrameMaker and XML or SGML	You may incur significant customization costs to set this up, but then you are guaranteed valid SGML or XML from your native FrameMaker files.
Excellent support for richly structured long documents	This is one of FrameMaker's key strengths, applicable to technical documentation and database publishing.
Ability to generate Acrobat 5 "tagged PDF"	Generating hyperlinked tables of contents and structured navigation panes automatically provide definite added value for files distributed via CD or the Web.
Enhanced multilingual font support	FrameMaker supports European, Oriental, and other fonts, as well as 8- and 16-bit Unicode. If you need multilingual publishing, this is a key FrameMaker benefit.

IS FRAMEMAKER RIGHT FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION?

Adobe provides the best solution for long and richly structured technical documents, and Adobe has an undisputed track record for supporting detailed layouts and multilingual fonts. The closest competitors are hybrid XML Word offerings (such as BroadVision's One-to-One Content) and native XML publishing offerings such as Arbortext's Epic and Corel SoftQuad's XMetaL. Because native XML publishing systems immediately recognize DTDs (or schemas), mapping files are not necessary with them.

SELECT FRAMEMAKER IF:

- Your authors are comfortable with FrameMaker and you see no need to move to XML.

- You want to move to a structured authoring environment and you know your XML model will either be an industry standard (such as Docbook) that is supplied with FrameMaker or will not be subject to change. There will be some knowledge transfer from unstructured FrameMaker to structured FrameMaker, but there will also be a learning curve.

- You realize you will incur customization costs to get started with structured FrameMaker and are satisfied with development cost estimates. Check with Adobe or third-party consultants to see if they have worked with document models similar to yours as a way of estimating customization costs. Customization is likely to be an important part of your organization's total cost of ownership. As the number and complexity of new XML standards emerges, customization costs will likely increase.

Be aware too that, as of this writing, FrameMaker can work only with DTDs, not with richer XML models called schemas. XMetaL and Epic work with both DTDs and schemas. Note that converting non-XML (legacy) content to XML can be an expensive and time-consuming proposition no matter which XML publishing solution you use. "Round tripping" XML content with native formats like Microsoft Word is possible, but some of XML's rich structure will be difficult to maintain. This difficulty is due to the nature of XML vis-à-vis proprietary document formats.

Lastly, XML's family of XSL formatting standards cannot now and may never match the richness achievable in FrameMaker. Still, XSL development skills are becoming far more widespread than those for customizing FrameMaker. A fundamental question to ask is whether your long-term plans require long-document capabilities and the ability to maintain rich layouts with a WYSIWYG interface. In multichannel publishing, after all, what you see depends on the channel to which you publish your single-source content.

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