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INNOVATIONS

IBM's hunt for better mouse leads to mini-joystick device

TED SELKER (left) invented the Trackpoint as an alternative to the conventional mouse and trackball designs for laptop computers. Keyboard (below) shows the Trackpoint pointer device between "g" and "h" keys.

JOE PUQUESE/AP

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Ted Selker's work building a better computer mouse gave new life to IBM's moribund laptop computer business.

Selker and fellow IBM scientist Joseph Rutledge created Trackpoint II, the red cursor control button on the keyboard of IBM's Thinkpads.

The innovation, brought to the market a year ago, was radical for IBM, which had been viewed as falling behind in new PC technology.

Competitors' laptops chiefly rely on trackballs — stationary rolling balls mounted in or attached to computers — to move the cursor that directs computer commands. The Trackpoint II functions like a mini-joystick.

"Trackpoint has been a very good differentiator for them and it's been an important part of the over-all success of the Thinkpad line," said Jeffrey Henning, PC analyst for BIS Strategic Decisions in Norwell, Mass.

Before last fall, IBM was barely in the laptop business. But Thinkpad models accounted for about 800,000 of the four million PCs IBM has sold in the past year, analysts say.

The peg is also on the keyboard of one IBM desktop model and may become an option for others.

But the decision to incorporate Trackpoint II didn't come easily. The researchers put pressure on IBM by touting it in a press release, which prompted customers to ask when the company was going to start using it.

"One of the things we really needed was for the product managers to believe this was going to make a splash," Selker said.

"A lot of what it took to get it into a product was documenting carefully that it did make an improvement for people and that it could be made cheaply."

The project took six years, with most of the time spent finding the right balance between finger pressure and cursor speed.

The researchers created a "dead zone" in which the cursor doesn't move if the button is accidentally bumped, two slow speeds, a fast speed the eye can follow and a "turbo" speed the eye can't.