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IBM unwraps fault-tolerant processor line

By James Connolly
CW Staff

RYE BROOK, N.Y. — IBM made official its plunge into the fault-tolerant market last week with the announcement of a system based on Stratus Computer, Inc. Stratus/32 superminicomputers.

IBM is introducing its System/88 just a month after the announcement of an OEM agreement providing IBM nonexclusive re-marketing rights to various Stratus products. According to some industry watchers, IBM's move could provide a boost for smaller companies fighting to enter the fault-tolerant transaction processing field while hurting the industry leader, Tandem Computers, Inc.

The three models of the System/88 will

be targeted to industries requiring uninterrupted on-line service, including banking, retailing and manufacturing, according to IBM. The System/88 reportedly utilizes the Stratus/32 processor and Stratus VOS operating system, under the name System/88 Operating System. The balance of the system, such as disk and tape drives, controllers and consoles, is composed of IBM peripherals.

Details such as performance figures for the System/88 were unavailable. However, a Stratus spokesman said the three versions of its Stratus/32 run at 0.7, 2 and 3 million instructions per second.

The entry level IBM system is the System/88 Model 4576-20, consisting of two processor modules, duplex 4M-byte sets of

memory, a 20-slot chassis, a 1600/3200 bit/in. tape drive, two 143M-byte disk drives, an IBM Personal Computer as a console, and eight communications lines, supporting asynchronous and synchronous communications. A typical configuration costs \$157,670.

The mid-range System/88 Model 4576-40 also has duplex 4M-byte processor modules, a 40-slot chassis, 32 communications lines and four 448M-byte disk drives. A typical system costs \$437,840.

The high-end System/88 Model 4576-60 is a duplex 8M-byte system with dual disk, tape and communications controllers, six 448M-byte disk drives, two tape drives and 31 lines. It costs \$672,000.

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IBM said the fault-tolerant systems, in which a duplicated component takes over for a component that fails, can communicate with other IBM systems, including the IBM 370 environment. Like the Stratus/32, the System/88 reportedly can be arranged in a string of 32 modules.

IBM reported that the System/88 can operate as an independent computer or communicate with other sys-

tems through SNA networks and X.25 packet switching networks as well as via bisynchronous or asynchronous protocols.

The System/88 will be available "on a limited basis" in late 1985, according to IBM. The company said marketing support will be provided by a new System/88 office in IBM's National Accounts and National Marketing divisions.

Omri Serlin, head of ITOM International in Los Altos, Calif., and an ob-

server of the fault-tolerant market, speculated that while customers may initially use Stratus application software on the System/88, IBM's move into the field will fuel application production by independent software developers.

He noted that some software that is likely to be used by early customers includes Stratus' interface for IBM's Systems Network Architecture, USF Unix-compatible interface, and Stratus' transaction processing

and office systems.

However, he said that the "limited" availability caveat could mean that IBM plans to introduce supplemental products, such as its own interfaces with other IBM systems, in the coming months.

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Serlin said the IBM announcement could have the effect of placing the computer industry giant's stamp of approval on a fault-tolerant market where only Stratus and Tandem have delivered significant numbers of systems. Stratus' installed base of 300 processors runs a distant second to Tandem's more than 7,000 processors.

"The potential for the fault-tolerant market is large already. The principal reason the systems aren't selling is the lack of compatibility with existing equipment and the lack of credibility of some of the companies. IBM's entry could have a blessing effect," noted Serlin.

But he said the entry could also hurt Tandem as IBM gives more credibility to Stratus. "A key influence will be negative in relation to Tandem. Customers who may have liked Stratus' products in the past often decided to go to Tandem because Stratus is new and inexperienced," observed Serlin.

He added that Stratus' OEM agreement with IBM doesn't mean that Stratus will abandon its end-user sales avenues. "They don't want to be captive to IBM," said Serlin, noting that other manufacturers have suffered when they relied heavily on IBM and then watched IBM abandon their product or introduce its own products in competition with the OEM's equipment.

IBM is located at 900 King St., Rye Brook, N.Y. 10573.