

PLASTICS PRODUCT REVIEW

Actify

Are CAD file conversions giving you nightmares? If so, this review might provide you with some excellent nighttime reading, and even if it does put you to sleep, it should relieve your CAD nightmares.

This review will focus on the 3DView software produced by Actify of San Francisco, California. 3DView enables 3D CAD designs produced by all major CAD vendors to be shared and published as easily as viewing a 2D digital image. Picture this as Adobe Acrobat for CAD systems. Any design produced by major CAD systems can then be viewed by anyone, particularly non-CAD professionals, as easily as viewing a picture file. The software is intended to normalize the CAD viewing process so that it is easily accessible to the masses, even across varying platforms.

Our review will first start out by describing what the system is intended for, what the uses are, and what advantages the software can create for your company. Basically we will describe all of the details as to why Actify feels they can help your company. However, those familiar with our work know we won't stop here. This is just the start. We then verify the claims made by the manufacturer. In this case we use the software to view a variety of different 3D designs that were originally produced in many different CAD systems. Does the software pass the test? Read on for the results.

General Information Regarding the Software

Much of the following information is taken directly from Actify's web page at www.actify.com. You can travel there for more information. This section is designed to provide you with information on the software along with Actify's sales pitch. Following this section we see if the sales work meshes with reality.

As previously mentioned, the 3DView software is designed to enable CAD designs, regardless of their origin, to be shared and viewed easily. Most of you have probably used Adobe Acrobat and know that they have a platform in which 2D digital files can be viewed by anyone who has the Adobe Acrobat viewer. Actify does the same thing for CAD designs. A CAD file produced by any of the major CAD systems (the chart accompanying this article lists the supported systems) can be saved as a 3DView file. From this point forward, anyone that has the 3DView software can do several things with the file. First and foremost, they can view it. However, much more can be done. Users can rotate, zoom, take measures, add notes, publish on the web, or e-mail the file to others (who can access the shared file even if they don't own a copy of 3DView). The software is designed to provide all of the necessary information in a simple to use format so that both CAD professionals and others (managers, customers, suppliers, salespeople, etc.) can work with the files.

Now you know what the software does, so what does it mean to you? There are several advantages to this software, but two main ones stand out to us. The first is the ability to normalize CAD files. If you get a CAD file from a non-compatible software system you will likely have problems opening the file. 3DView eliminates this problem. The second advantage is also a big one. The software allows complex CAD files to be viewed as a simple "view only" files by non-CAD professionals. Thus, it is easy to share ideas with non-technical team members so that everyone can be on the same page. It is one thing to describe a project, it is quite another to give someone a visual example which they can rotate, take measurements from, and zoom in on.

What applications are well suited for Actify? There are many, but we'll cover a few of the main jobs it can accomplish. One area in which 3DView excels is in design visualization. By providing every link in the supply chain with the same easy to use information, the software achieves gains in profitability and in time to market. In particular, it can be used for quote generation for RFP/RFQ, project management, and mold and machinery design projects. For quote generation you can quickly obtain your potential client's designs so that you provide a quick, accurate quote. Efficient project management is achieved by the fast, detailed sharing of information. 3DView helps by providing one platform and advanced markup features in which specific questions relating to the design can be added to the file. Finally, when designing molds and machinery, there are often several team members working on various aspects of the design. By communicating through 3DView, money and time can be saved on the front end through the reduction of scrap and inventory. When working with molds, the mold designer is easily able to get quick feedback from the processing engineer, making for very wide processing windows.

3DView can also help you communicate your designs to others. Say you are headed into a meeting and you can't lug around your complex, hard drive eating CAD software. Or what if you are talking to non-technical types about a new proposal? In this case you can provide information in a way that nearly everyone can understand.

Finally, the best news may be that the Actify provides a free viewer for those who simply want to view and exchange 3DView files. Thus, non-CAD professionals who wish to view 3DView files can do so for free. With manufacturing's ever tightening budgets this definitely has to be considered an advantage.

From this information you can probably visualize ways in which 3DView can help your company. That is, if it really works. Is it really easy to use? Does it really work across all platforms? The next section provides the answers.

Test Results

To test the software we first obtained a copy. Meanwhile, we also consulted with CAD designers in the industry who were also familiar with the software. We had them send us several 3DView files that initiated in many different CAD systems. From here we opened the files to see if they were really easy to use and accurate. We tested ease of use by having non-CAD professionals view the drawings and answer some basic questions about each one. If they could not answer the questions, the system must be too technical for non-professionals. To test accuracy and compatibility across platforms we compared measurements taken from 3DView with measurements taken from the initial CAD system. If the measurements don't match, it is safe to say that 3DView is inaccurate and may not be suitable for use. Finally, if the files don't open at all, or contain major problems, the software can not be considered useful.

So what did we find out?

The software passed on all accounts. In fact, it did more than pass, it excelled. In the ease of use portion of the test our non-CAD professionals were able to open the file, e-mail the file to

someone else, rotate the image, zoom in on the image, and take measurements- all without technical training. Therefore, we can safely conclude that the software is easy to use. In the accuracy portion of the testing we are happy to report that all of the files opened and included all of the details provided by the parent CAD system. There were not flaws or inaccuracies. Finally, dozens of measurements were taken, and they all matched the measurements taken on the initial CAD system in which they were produced.

Conclusions

Based on our testing, the 3DView system is a runaway success. Actify feels that they have made the Adobe Acrobat of CAD systems, and our test shows that this is true. The system was easy to use for our non-CAD professionals while providing accurate copies of the designs and drawings. Every measurement was dead on and every file copied over accurately. The software does its job, and it can help your facility in a number of ways. Furthermore, as the software's acceptance in the marketplace grows, the advantages will multiply from company to company.