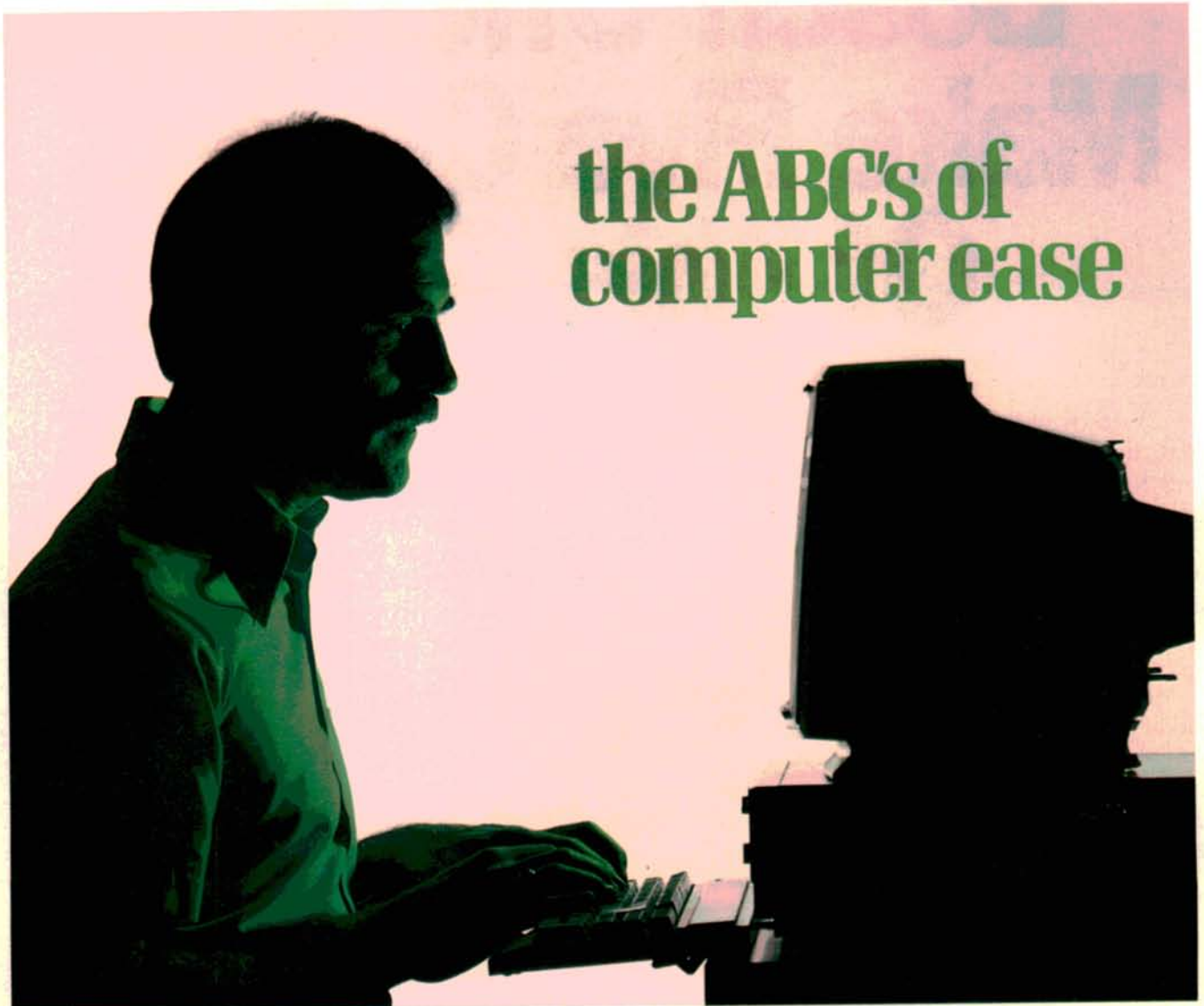


Computer Basics

PART ONE



Remember the days of ABC's? You'd go to school where you'd struggle to learn how to print, clumsily holding that big fat pencil in your hand. I remember them. We had cards with ABC people. Mr. B was a bee. Mr. A was an apple. Kids today are learning the ABC's too. Only, to them, B stands for byte, and C for computer. Computers have invaded the education system, the toy market, and the job place. Today's children are playing video games on them, and learning to use computers even before they learn to read or write. But, many of us relics from the days of pen and paper, or even typewriters, still cling to our illiteracy in the hope that we won't have to face those complicated, and somewhat frightening objects we know as computers.

I must tell you that my acquaintance with computers began only recently. Not being all that technically minded, I feared that the computer would be somewhat less than "user-friendly."

Guess what? I'm zipping along with the best of 'em

now. I wouldn't trade this computer for any typewriter. The computer makes my job a lot easier. And, I suspect, it could do the same for you. But, before you make the decision to computerize, there are a number of things you should consider.

History

Manual management—of funds, inventory, customers, and information—was the only approach available to shop owners for many years. But, as computers began to enter the business world, it was only a matter of time before programs were created for various businesses, including yours. According to many of my sources, in the last decade automotive software has really come into its own. How did much of the software come to be? In most cases, managers or owners of service garages hired programmers to adapt or create software for their businesses. Some of the

SERVICE AFTER THE SALE

Pete van der Vate
Owner
Precision Import Service
Fairfax, Virginia

Software: GarageKeeper® 3 by Computer Assistance Inc.

Pete van der Vate has been in the auto business for 30 years. He first purchased a data-base type system for his business in 1982. His original reasons for computerizing? To track pricing, parts, and mechanic productivity. He now not only tracks prices, parts, and productivity, he also keeps track of finances and profits and uses the computer to send out customer mailings.

He quickly found that the two major areas in which a computer can help are time savings and professionalism. "A laser printer delivers legal document-looking work orders instead of some nasty old greasy work order. When the customer leaves a lot of money with you, he wants to know why he spent that money. I can't overemphasize enough the importance of communicating with the customer and doing it in a professional way."

Van der Vate first looked for six months at ready-made programs for

garage use before buying GarageKeeper®. His advice to buyers? "You can go to a trade show and get a demonstration. Ask to see how the software is—how to set it up, how to pull out different files for information. But the atmosphere at the show isn't always conducive to learning what you need to know. So, it may be even better to find out who is using the system in your area. Have your questions ready before you go. Find out what it will take to integrate the system into your business. There are too many sellers out there with a marginal product for the garage trade. So you've got to be sure to ask questions, take notes, and research."

"Once you do decide on a program, you must have a lot of in-house organization because you're going to have to enter all your inventory into the system. But, before you can enter the inventory, you've got to know where the parts are!"

Once GarageKeeper® was installed, did it take van der Vate long to get acclimated to the software? "After buying GarageKeeper®, my only regret was why didn't I buy store-bought software sooner! You can get acclimated in two or three days. The thing that takes the longest is entering your existing inventory. If you don't have someone in your shop who knows how to type, it's difficult. A good typist can save you a lot

of time. And, you have to know who your vendors are before you begin entering them.

"Once the inventory's been entered, you still have to enter parts and write up repair orders for new customers. We process 14-18 work tickets a day, and many of them arrive at the same time, in the morning or late in the day. Since the customer doesn't want to wait while you process his work order, it's a great convenience and time-saver to have a program that lets you enter pre-programmed job descriptions/classifications (akin to menu-pricing). About 25 percent of our work categories are programmed into the computer."

Some final advice from Pete van der Vate? "Make sure that the company you buy from services what it sells. We had a few teething problems with our new software, but we'd call Myles (president of Computer Assistance), and he'd take care of it. People don't realize how important service is on something such as computers. A lot of companies out there just go "Yeah, yeah, yeah," when you ask them about service after the sale. Computer Assistance is a small company but it's very responsive to its customers. I just can't say enough about how important a support staff is to a computer buyer."

software was successful—some of it was not. The creation of software seems to lend itself to fly-by-night companies. Remarked one computer user, "When I began to look for software, I found over 100 companies out there who were creating it for my business. But, when I investigated, I found out that less than one-third of the programs and companies were reputable. The reputable ones had developed software, gone on to perfect it, market it, and offer support for it." My caution to you, as you enter the world of computerization: **LET THE BUYER BEWARE.**

Computerization Preparation

When purchasing a computer system, part of your preparation should include learning the language. Enter the world of computers without even a basic knowledge of computer lingo, and you may feel like

someone who finds himself dictionary-less in a foreign land. For your convenience, I have included a glossary of some of the more basic computer terms at the end of this article.

What else do you need to know? Hardware immediately comes to mind when we think of computer systems. And, it is important. But, as Joe Ritchie, vice president of Transformation Systems stresses, "Get the software first. You don't want to go out and buy hardware and then find out that the software you decide on can't be used with the hardware." That's why it is so important that you concentrate first on selecting software that will work for your business. Choose quality software that is designed to fit your needs. For example, if you are an import specialist who stocks a large number of parts, your requirements may be very different from a general repair garage who stocks a minimum number of items. Be certain that the software vendors understand your business and its needs.

COMPUTER MARKETING

Tom Spooner
Owner
Voltek Import Service, Inc.
Denver, Colorado

Software: AutoCentrum by Centrum Business Systems Inc.

Tom Spooner is an independent import specialist. His shop, which specializes in Volvos, has four bays and three people. Before he purchased AutoCentrum, Spooner researched computer programs for about six months. He wrote to 30 different companies to get literature and prices. When looking for a computer program, he was concerned mainly with its marketing and merchandising capabilities. He doesn't keep much inventory on hand, so extensive inventory management capabilities were not that important to him. But, he noted, "AutoCentrum does have inventory capabilities. It will even show trending in parts sales—those things that are moving slow, and those things that are moving fast."

The reason he chose AutoCentrum? "My main concern was record keeping. We keep records on customers for at least one year because that's how long

we guarantee most of our parts and labor. We like to send follow-up letters to remind them when their cars are due for service. We also send thank-you letters to customers who have spent a lot of money with us.

"It's not great having a customer list in your computer file if it's just going to sit there. Centrum lets me use that list to promote my business. The customers really appreciate the service reminders we mail them. They're happy to get them because they tend to forget about regular service."

What else has AutoCentrum helped Spooner to do? "I've used the computer to send out Christmas card mailings. I hadn't done them in several years due to the time involved in preparing cards for about 600 customers. I'm also considering using the computer to do annual or semi-annual generic informational letters to customers—little service tips, little reminders about car care facts, etc. I use the mailings as a low-key kind of merchandiser just to let people know that we're here.

"I also like the ability to print in special notes on work orders explaining the service performed. We use one printer to print the work order for the technicians on plain white paper and another to print the good, official work orders for the customers. Be sure that

you aren't too limited as to what you can put on the work order when you buy a system."

Spooner's last bit of advice to shop owners who are looking at systems now? "Ask yourself what you want to accomplish with the system. Do you need a lot of inventory space in the system? Do you need bookkeeping/accounting features? What are you doing now for bookkeeping and inventory? It's easy to over-buy, so you have to know what you need. You also need to find out what the company charges for software add-ons and updates if you don't buy everything at once. With Centrum the updates are free for one year.

"Also, be sure that the people you buy from will follow up on any problems you have with their system. The manual needs to be complete so you can learn the system quickly. It took me about a week to get comfortable doing regular work orders. Then I trained the other guys, and they learned the basic operation in a few days.

"I've had my system now for about nine months and I have no regrets. It does what I wanted it to do—it helps me to promote my business."

Then, the software company will be able to direct you to exactly what you need, in software, and in hardware.

In order to select the right software, you must be organized enough to know what you need. Software and hardware are a big investment. You shouldn't purchase compulsively, and you should not expect a computer to be a panacea for disorganization or a poorly run business. In order to computerize, you must start out by being organized. Any program will require you to enter large amounts of information in, before it can start working for you. If your inventory is scattered everywhere, you'll need to organize it. Your customer records and accounts should be up-to-date so that your computer can begin with the correct information. Then, it's a matter of being diligent in your use and updating of the system in order to make it work for you.

Software Selection

"The computer should be a tool. You should not look for it to do 100 percent of what you're doing manually, but about 70-80 percent. Plan on using your computer to do the time consuming, tedious manual tasks," advises Arn Rasker, President of Centrum Business Systems.

A good software program should solve problems and save time for you. It can also save or make you money, if you believe that time is money. How? I'll give you one example. Suppose that you do about two hours worth of record keeping (invoices, work orders, inventory updates, and general ledger entries) a day. Maybe you also do repairs. You may be worth about \$10 an hour doing bookwork, and about \$40 an hour (for example) doing repairs. You can cut your paper-

work time down to minutes with the computer, make about \$80 more per day and within the year, you'll have made up for the cost of the computer!

Checking It Out

A well-chosen program, and diligence in learning it and maintaining it, can pay off. To obtain the most help from a program, you really have to research what is out there, and not buy on impulse. Check out not only the programs, but the companies as well. Don't be afraid to ask for references, and check them out. What to ask? First, find out from the company how long they've been in business. How did their software come about? How long have they been offering this software? What kind of support will they offer? What kind of training? What about updates and add-ons? Do you have to buy it all now, or can you add as you feel that you're ready? Then, when you are satisfied, go to the references. If there are people in your area using the software, go visit them. Sit down and have them show you how the program works. Ask them what they like about it. What does it do for their business? What about the company they purchased it from? Are they receiving adequate information? Is the manual easy to follow? Anything it doesn't do that they wish it did?

The questions you ask and the calls you make now, can save you a lot of money and grief later. Since I felt it was extremely important to find out what users were saying about the software they had purchased, we made a few calls of our own. You will find their comments featured throughout this article. Learn from

Suggested Additional Readings:

Stan Augarten. *Bit by Bit: An Illustrated History of Computers*. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1984.

H. Dominic Covey and Neil Harding McAlister. *Computer Consciousness: Surviving the Automated 80's*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1980.

Michael Crichton. *Electronic Life: How to Think about Computers*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983.

Robert F. Edmunds. *The Prentice-Hall Standard Glossary of Computer Terminology*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1985.

Alfred Glossbrenner. *How to Buy Software*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984.

Dona Z. Meilach. *Before You Buy a Computer*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1983.

Alexander Wolfe and Rodney Zaks. *From Chips to Systems: An Introduction to Microcomputers*. San Francisco, California: Sybex, 1987.

their experience.

The Basic System

Do not feel that if you can't do everything, you shouldn't do anything. For some people, eager to plunge into the computer world, it may be fine to buy everything right away. But, for others, it may not be the right thing to do. As Joe Palmieri, marketing services manager for loadSTAR Systems notes, "It is important to buy only what you are comfortable with now. If it's a good program, the add-ons and enhancements will be available later on."

Perhaps you have determined that you need the help of a computer in every area: inventory control, accounting, customer records, productivity, scheduling, and marketing. Then you will probably be interested in software such as Centrum's AutoCentrum, or Repair Shop System's program. Every part of these pro-

grams is integrated so that you must purchase the entire program. The advantages? You have the capability to do everything—you just have to decide at what point you'd like to learn it all. You also do not have to worry about installing additional programs, because it is all there. The main disadvantage? If you have carefully evaluated your needs and determined that you only need the software for a few things, you cannot purchase individual modules as you can with companies like Transformation Systems or loadSTAR. For someone only interested in inventory control, and not accounting, the modules are a way to obtain what you want, and only that. Or, for someone who's a bit leery of this whole computer thing, it allows you to be cautious since you can buy what you would like now, and add on later. I guess it all depends whether you're the type who dives into the pool, or tiptoes in!

To be continued next month

—By Marla Schleider

ACCESS TIME: Generally expressed in milliseconds, the time needed to transfer data from memory or disk to a central processing unit.

APPLICATIONS PROGRAM: A program designed to do a limited, specific job such as word processing or accounting.

BACK UP: To make a duplicate copy of a program or file. This copy protects you in the event that the original is lost or damaged.

BAUD: The speed at which information is transferred in bits per second.

BIT: A binary digit which is the smallest unit of computer data, expressed as either 0 (off) or 1 (on). Computers use these values in different combinations to do their counting.

BYTE: The sequence of bits, usually eight bits long, used to represent one typed character.

CENTRAL PROCESSING UNIT (CPU): The "brain" of the computer that contains the CPU chip. The CPU chip does the actual computing and directs the flow of information inside the computer and to its peripherals.

DISK: A magnetic record that is used to store data. Disks can be hard (fixed) or flexible (floppy).

DISK DRIVE: This "plays" the disk. It can write data onto the disk or read data from it.

DISK OPERATING SYSTEM (DOS):

The program that tells the CPU how to transfer information to and from a disk.

DOCUMENTATION: Written instructions for your software or hardware.

FILE: An organized collection of data. A file might be a letter, a customer list, even a program.

HARDWARE: The hard parts of the computer such as the monitor, keyboard, and CPU.

INPUT/OUTPUT: Input is information received by the computer or its storage devices. You input to the computer when you type on the keyboard, for example. Output is information from the computer that is sent to an outside device like a monitor or printer to make it usable to you, the operator.

INTEGRATED: Information joined in such a way that it can be entered into one program and used by another.

KILOBYTE (KB): A measurement of memory equal to about 1000 bytes.

LOAD: To enter a program into the computer from a storage device.

MEMORY: A part of the computer that stores information for future retrieval.

MEGABYTE: Another measurement unit for memory equal to about one million bytes.

MENU: A display of tasks the computer can perform.

MODEM: A piece of equipment that links two computers over a phone line.

MULTUSER: An operating system that allows many users to share it.

PERIPHERALS: Accessories such as printers and modems that are not an integral part of the computer, but work in conjunction with it.

PROGRAM: The instructions that tell a computer what to do.

RANDOM ACCESS MEMORY (RAM): Sometimes known as a read/write memory, you can store data in it or take data from it. Information in RAM lasts only as long as the computer stays on.

READ: Extract data from the memory or disk for processing.

READ ONLY MEMORY (ROM): This memory is built into the computer's hardware and is not erased when the computer is turned off or when the power is interrupted. Unlike RAM, you cannot write to it. You can, however, read from it.

SOFTWARE: A general term that refers to computer programs that can be run on hardware.

STORAGE: Another word for memory. It is most commonly used to describe long-term data storage.

SUPPORT: Services from a software or hardware vendor that should include training, information, and assistance.

WRITE: Record information into memory or disk.