Computer Basics

PART TWO

the ABC's of computer ease
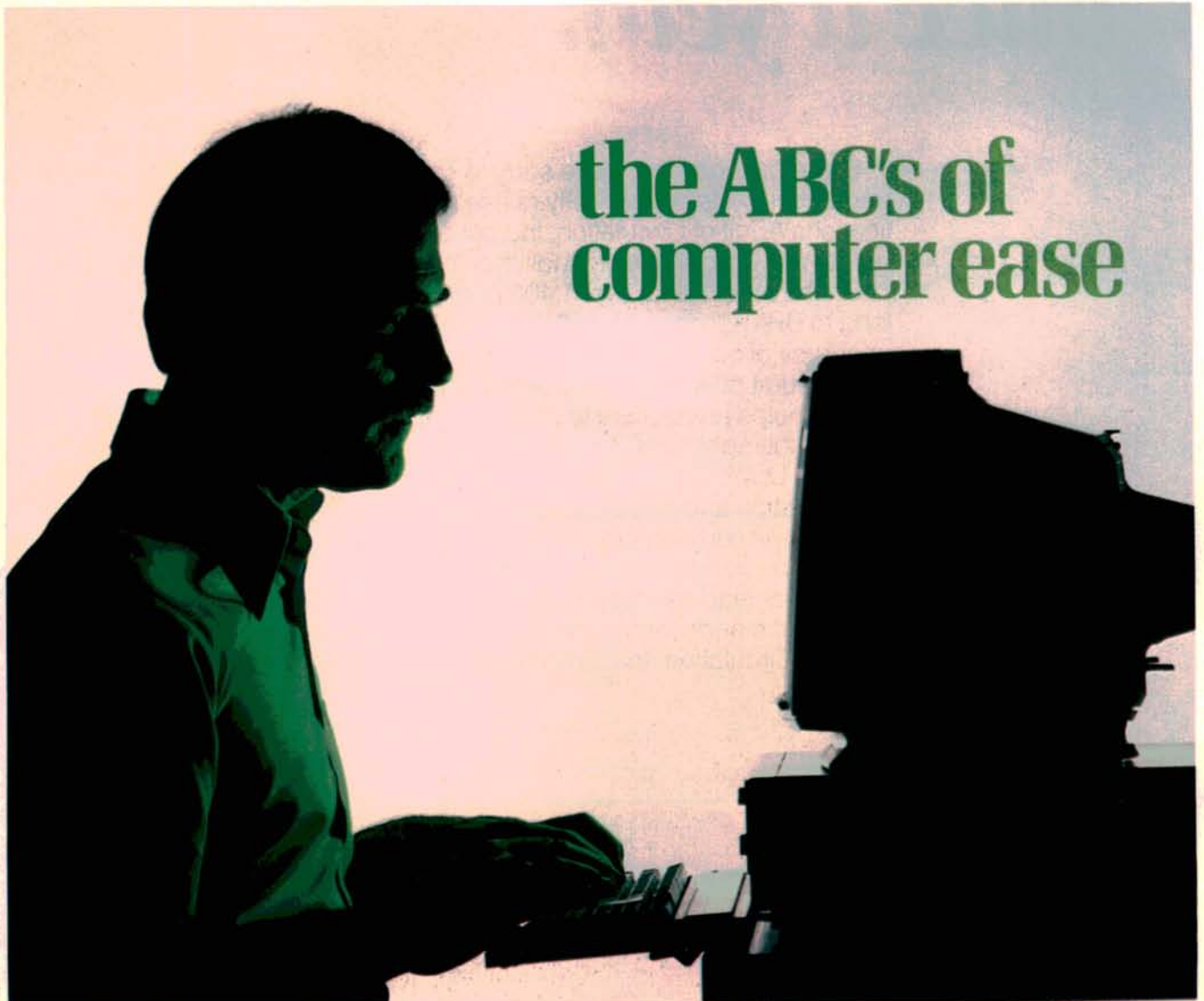
Last month we began an introductory look at computer software for the service facility. Let's pick up now where we left off.

Whatever your needs, you should know all of the options that software offers you. Do you have a large inventory on hand? Then the program you choose should have the capability to keep track of inventory. You may want a program that can forecast (via use of artificial intelligence) what parts you should order based on true consumption and trends. Or perhaps you would like it to provide you with a list of parts, quantities on hand, and the names and numbers of suppliers from whom you can order them. What about coded pricing? You can tell the computer by the press of a letter how much it should charge the customer for parts. Or, maybe you'd like to go on-line with the supplier's catalog and order via the computer. Depending upon what program you choose, you may be able to do any of these things.

Would you like to take care of routine accounting in a more efficient manner? Programs offer everything from general ledger, accounts payable, accounts receivable, job costing, work orders, invoices, tax calculations, to financial statements. When it comes to accounting, there are some things that you should be aware of. You need to look at the program. Is it fully interactive? In other words, when you post amounts in one section of the accounting program, will it automatically adjust them in another? Or, do you have to do it all manually? Does it operate on what is known as real time, or by BATCH process? Real time means that the moment you enter a figure, it immediately adjusts it everywhere else. At any time, then, you can produce accurate, up-to-the-minute statements. If it's a BATCH process, the information is posted to other files, but this occurs periodically, not instantaneously.

There are also some cautions given by many of my sources regarding accounting programs. As Myles Swift, president of Computer Assistance Inc. says, "Keep in mind that no one is qualified to do full book-

ORDERING PARTS VIA COMPUTER

Tom Travers
Manager
Tire Pros
Framingham, Massachusetts
Software and Hardware: Triad
TelePart System

Tom Travers manages a Firestone store that performs total car services. There are five technicians and eight bays. Framingham Auto Parts, a local jobber, offered Travers the Triad TelePart system for a 30-day free trial period. Says Travers, "The trial period was a big plus. If someone had just put it in for a week, I probably would not have been interested. It really does take a few weeks to get acclimated to the unit."

Once acclimated, what did Travers think? "When you're ordering parts, it eliminates the middleman (the counterman), it eliminates confusion, and eliminates mistakes. It's a great help when you're writing estimates.

"Without the computer, if you made a mistake on a part number, or the counterman made a mistake on a part number, you never knew it until the part arrived and you saw that it didn't fit. Using the computer definitely reduces the number of wrong parts that

we get. It forces you to answer the important questions on each application, things like model, VIN, etc. The computer also saves time because the price is listed right there on the screen—there's no flipping back and forth from the front of the catalog back to the price sheet and back again."

What does Travers think of computers and software in general? "They must save you time. If they don't, what's the sense in buying them? You also have to be sure that you feel totally comfortable with the equipment before you buy it. And, it has to be simple to use. I learned at my own pace by using it constantly for about two or three days. Then, I was able to show the other guys how to do it. Now, this is so easy to use that it's second nature to us. Every guy in the shop uses it. They've gotten so lazy after using the computer that they don't want to look anything up in the catalog anymore!"

Advantages, other than ease of use, that the TelePart system offers: "Now we know right away if our supplier has the part, and we know whether or not we can take the job in today. From the moment I walk in the door in the morning until the moment I leave at night, I'm very busy. The more time the computer saves me, the more time I have to do what I'm supposed to be doing—selling service! You have to constantly

sell service."

According to Travers, it's also a big help with scheduling. "With the computer, I can keep my schedule going at a quicker, smoother pace because I can make a decision right away whether I'm going to do the job or whether I'm not going to do it."

One final thing that Travers noted is that it cuts down on frustration, with countermen, with wrong parts, and with customers. "When you call a parts store, you never know if you're talking to a guy who has been in the automotive business 15 minutes or 15 years. It's very frustrating when you get the wrong part. Then, the car's not done and someone's waiting for it. This way, the only one to blame when you get the wrong parts is yourself. The computer won't lie to you. And, you won't have guys tied up on the phone arguing with parts stores."

· Time savings, simplicity, and less frustration due to human error are the main advantages Travers noted for having a Triad TelePart system. Those benefits certainly mean a lot to him, judging by his concluding comment, "I'm totally sold on it!"

keeping. So, even if you can do much of it, you'll still need to turn it over to an accountant eventually. Many jobs have been lost because managers buy the accounting software and expect their help to be proficient in it. Generally, the costs to become so efficient that you don't need an accountant are too expensive.''

Would you like to use a computer as a marketing tool? Not only will a good program save you time in other areas so that you can do more marketing, it will help you to do it. By pressing a few keys, you can now do price quotes, maintenance reminders, new customer mailings, suggested maintenance sheets, or vehicle histories. Price quotes, which can be tedious and time-consuming if done by hand, particularly when you may not even get the job, may now become a regular part of your marketing plan. Likewise, most programs will allow you to easily create follow-up correspondences. An example of how one program, AutoCentrum, works? Invoices are marked for follow-up correspondence. Then, a standard generic letter

may be merged with the customer's name and address to create a personalized reminder. The computer can automatically print up reminders, and then remove the mailing codes from the invoices. It can work in a similar manner for new customer mailings.

Can't remember the vehicle's history offhand when a customer brings it in? You can call it up on the screen and determine what items need to be checked. In many cases, the program itself can tell you what the vehicle is due for. Customers will be pleased to find that you have such remarkable recall about their vehicles. And, you will be better able to service the automobile, and perform preventive maintenance. While we are on the subject of maintenance, one system, Vehicle Information Plus, being introduced by National Software, prints out a manufacturer's suggested maintenance for the vehicle when it prints up a work order. The maintenance sheet can be used to help sell service.

What else can a computer program do for you? In many cases, scheduling can be done on the computer.

GROWING WITH THE SYSTEM

**Art Durrence
Owner
Layton's Garage
Ft. Lauderdale, Florida
Software: Repair Management System
by Transformation Systems**

Art Durrence, who owns an independent service garage with 10 bays and a staff of 10, got his first computer system in 1985. Why did he decide to computerize? ''The paperwork an automotive business generates is unbelievable! Before I got the computer, I was spending 30 hours a week doing paperwork—in addition to running the shop. The paperwork can really tax you.''

He started out with Tandy hardware fitted with Transformation System's software. He gradually updated the software and reached a point where the hardware wasn't fast enough to run the software. He then decided to buy the hardware offered from Transformation Systems. Why? ''The reason I bought the complete package is that I didn't want the hassle of having to go back and forth between the software and hardware company if things didn't work. I bought everything from the one company and now it's easy to get it all repaired and maintained. Plus, when I updated the hardware, end-of-month reports that used to take half a night

only took 30 minutes.''

Did it take Durrence long to get used to the software? ''The hardest thing I went through was organizing the inventory. It took me and another guy one solid year, working at it when we were able, to get the parts bins organized. Nobody in the industry has a turn-key operation where guys come in and set you up. I'd like to see a system offered where the vendor would send people in who would then key in all the data such as inventory and accounting information so you wouldn't have to do it yourself.''

When the system was first installed, Durrence and his staff began writing up work orders and entering them into the computer after the fact. Within about three months, they were entering the information in when the customer arrived, making up work orders on the spot. According to Durrence, it's not only the staff who have to get acclimated to the computer; the customers have to get used to it as well. ''Remember that you have to carry the customer through the transition with you when you computerize. Remember that this (computerization) is a big, big step for everybody—for the guys in the shop, for the people in the front office, for you, and for the customers. Sometimes you have to work through growing pains as you put the system to work in your business.''

''People don't want to read anybody's handwriting. They're happy to see something a machine printed. And it's impressive to them that you can punch in their name and call up their car's history. They like seeing the history right up there on the screen.'' Durrence has a computer in the office, one in the service driveway, one at the parts department counter, and his own terminal at home which is connected to the shop's by a modem. He also has a lady who operates the office computer full time. And, his system is still growing! ''I like Transformation Systems because they listen, offer updates, and incorporate user-suggested refinements into the software. I pay $800 per year in service fees and support charges so I get the updates. Some guys will try to save money by not paying the support charge, but I look at it this way—I have a choice in making this system better, in making it what I want it to be.''

His advice to you about computerizing? ''When some guys look into computers, they're going to be dumbfounded by the complexity of the things. If I had to do it all over again, I'd take a basic computer course at the local college before I did it. It helps to have some idea how computers search for and pull out information.''

The program can automatically assign whichever technicians are specialists in the repair to be done, to that job. Based on parts, labor, and time, it can calculate your complete job cost. You can play "what if". By changing one number, many programs will let you know how it will affect your bottom line. You can examine productivity of your employees, look at your gross sales at any time, print up invoices and work orders, sort customers via vehicle, telephone, or name.

Training and Support

"Whatever you end up buying, talk to them about support," advises Peter Hunt, advertising manager for Repair Shop Systems. The training and support you receive will probably determine whether the computer becomes a useful, productive tool for your business, or just another item to collect dust. Training varies from over-the-phone counseling, and on-screen demos and tutorials, to schooling at company training centers, or in-shop lessons. Make sure that training is offered and be certain that you are comfortable with that type of training.

Once you are trained, the company must offer adequate support when you have questions. Is there a modem installed with the system that enables you to go on-line with the company when you have problems? Do they provide newsletters and manuals that can be understood and followed? What about when you have a problem? Who do you turn to—a local vendor, a toll-free hotline, a jobber in your area? If you must contact the company, and they are three hours behind you, how early can you contact them? Do you have to pay for support after a certain time period, or is it free? When you call with questions, how quickly does the company get back to you? Does the system come with any warranties? Will they replace or repair equipment or software if it does not work?

What Does the Future Bring?

There's a lot to consider right now, I know. And as the computer industry rapidly changes and grows, you can expect quite a few more choices. Software and hardware will continue to flood the market. Modems will play an important part in on-line communication, both with jobbers, and with data banks that can provide technical information.

Compact disk based systems such as the one currently being introduced by Alldata will become increasingly popular because of the extensive storage space they offer. Alldata's information retrieval system is designed for use by mechanics and contains information from over 50,000 technical bulletins for popular import and domestic vehicles. It is updated quarterly, can log into the Triad computer to locate and order parts, and even lets you call up technical information based on a car's symptoms! "The system is designed to make you money by saving you time in comebacks, diagnosis, and parts location," remarks Linda Bos, vice president of sales for Alldata.

As a result of all these options, you will see an increasing number of repair businesses entering the computer age. Because, as Arn Rasker, president of Centrum Business Systems, says, "In the business world, computers are no longer a luxury. They are a necessity to survive."

—By Marla Schleider

Additional Software Manufacturers

Throughout this article, we have quoted several manufacturers who produce computer software for your business. There are many additional companies that do produce automotive software. To find out about them, and the manufacturers mentioned in this article, you can either contact your local trade associations or pick up their literature at trade shows. If you still have trouble obtaining information, please let us know and we will be happy to help you out.