



Low-Cost Estimator Fits the Bill

by Morris D. Carey, Jr.

I love to review software products for all levels of users – from beginner to computer whiz and from small builder to bid developer. I have finally found an estimating program designed for use with an IBM PC or clone that is made to order for the contractor with an annual volume ranging from \$200,000 to \$500,000. And, believe it or not, it sells for a super-easy-to-swallow \$150.

If the buck-and-a-half is too tough a financial byte (excuse the pun), then look into the \$10 demo version. It's a fine representation of how the program works.

Clean and Simple

This program is called the "JS Cost Estimate," and it's hot. JS stands for Jenny Systems, the manufacturing company that created the software. Jenny Systems is located at 1776 Asbury Rd. S.E., Grand Rapids, MI 49506; 616/942-8220.

Talk about clean and simple! The program includes one floppy disk and a 1/2-inch-thick manual. Half of the manual is devoted to examples and blank forms, which you can photocopy and use to organize data for input during database setup.

There is on-screen help at the flip of one key, which can keep you out of trouble while you are learning to maneuver from screen to screen. You will still have to read the manual, however, since the on-screen info is minimal and can be relied upon only as a reminder.

The database (price book) is limited only by the size of your hard disk, which essentially means it's unlimited. You can enter all the line items of work you wish.

Most users I've surveyed don't use more than about 30 general categories of work, but this program allows for 90 user-defined divisions. There is no limit to the number of items in each division, and each item, in turn, can be broken down into as many as 16 parts – each of which can be assigned its own price. These groups of parts do not have the power of true "assemblies," such as I have described in earlier articles. However, the 16 parts to each item allow the user to enter at once several values involved with a given item of work. For example: An item called "supply & install recessed light" could consist of: labor to install, the can itself, the trim ring, sales tax, delivery costs, overhead, and profit. All are entered on the estimate as a single unit cost.

Unlike most other starter systems, JS Cost Estimate can be used very effectively to deal with the problem of price breakdown within the item level – a feature lacking in several of the more expensive estimating programs. This feature sets JS apart from most of the other low-priced programs.

The system allows you to list your estimates to about five standard printers and lets you modify the program to talk to other printers.

System reports (printouts of data)

are sparse but adequate. They cannot be modified by the user (as of this writing), but program developer Fred Meyerson tells me the extra cost option is in the works. The estimate printout is clean, neat, and easy to understand, and so are the other reports that list database information.

Overhead and profit can be included in the estimate report at the item level or can be presented at the end of the estimate as a percentage of the estimated subtotal. (You can redefine these percentages any time you wish.)

To see the simplicity of the estimating report, follow the sample estimate on the following page, sent to me by Jenny Systems user Patrick Thompson. Patrick uses the program in his high-end remodeling business in Grand Rapids, Mich. The toughest part, he wrote, was creating the database. After that, he says, "the system is foolproof...we never have to refer to the manual." The estimate shown is adapted from an actual job.

Estimates are entered via the keyboard directly into a quantity field, or through a really neat on-screen pop-up calculator. Once an entry is made through the calculator, that value can be called up and reused until a new value is entered into the calculator (which erases the previous entry). For example, if you are calculating an item with a value in cubic feet, simply enter length, width, and height into the calculator, press a key, and the volume is entered into the quantity field.

Data entry is somewhat slow. Each line item of work must be called up by its number or from a selection screen. This is a small price to pay, however, for the low price, simplicity, and general ease of use.

JS is not a tremendously powerful program in the sense that it doesn't have the bells and whistles that the bigger, more expensive programs offer. But it is absolutely the best starter program I've seen in a while. It seems relatively bug free (I couldn't make it crash), and although customer support is available, you probably won't need it since the program is so simple.

There is no database provided with the Jenny System as is done by other software companies; you must create and enter your own. But that's okay, since I've never seen a company-supplied database I've liked anyway.

Remember that an estimating program is simply a vehicle to handle your own data in a quick and accurate manner.

You wanted one that didn't cost much – well, here it is. However, I figure the price will be going up when the people at Jenny Systems realize what a real jewel they have.

Battle the Learning Curve and Win

So you have Lotus 1-2-3, or WordStar, or dBase III or IV, and you tried making the program dance, and instead you scuffed your shoes all up.

Sample Estimate

PTSI Remodeling, Grand Rapids, Mich.

PROJECT DATE: OWNER DATE:
 Smith 1 John & Mary Smith
 100 Main St. 100 Main St
 Anywhere, USA Anywhere, USA

NOTES:
 Bath remodel

COST ESTIMATE FOR PROJECT NUMBER: SMITH 1

ITEM	DESCRIPTION	UOM	QUANTITY	UNIT COST	EXTENDED	TOTAL AMOUNT
<i>Div 1</i>	<i>Plans & Permits</i>					
L104	Building permit & preparation	EA	1	50.00	50.00	
L105	Building permit & preparation	M	15	5.00	75.00	
	TOTAL PLANS AND PERMITS					\$125.00
<i>Div 2</i>	<i>Tear Out</i>					
L325	Ceramic tile mud ste	SF	130	1.00	130.00	
L328	Carpet tackless	SF	50	0.07	3.50	
L331	Nonbearing wall w/plaster & gypsum	LF	15	5.33	79.95	
L351	Stud wall w/ solid wood paneling	SF	30	0.22	6.60	
L365	Ceiling w/plaster & gypsum	SF	30	0.22	6.60	
L410	Wood or steel kitchen cabinets	EA	3	8.80	26.40	
L411	Plastic Countertop	LF	5	1.10	5.35	
L439	Interior door & trim	EA	1	17.00	17.00	
	TOTAL TEAR OUT					\$291.30
<i>Div.14</i>	<i>Plumbing</i>					
M10000	Jones quote	EA	1	1,090.00	1,090.00	
	Total Plumbing					\$1,090.00
<i>Div. 16</i>	<i>Electrical</i>					
1584	Ground Fault outlet	EA	2	57.00	114.00	
1602	Bath fix & switch over med cab	EA	1	131.48	131.48	
1603	Rec fixture & switch new work	EA	2	89.68	179.36	
1651	100W combo fan & heat in bath	EA	1	250.00	250.00	
	TOTAL ELECTRICAL					\$674.84
<i>Div. 18</i>	<i>Interior Walls</i>					
1756	Thincoat plastering	SF	650	.042	273.00	
1775	Ceramic tile with durock	SF	85	11.00	935.00	
L1756	Thincoat Plastering	SF	650	0.88	572.00	
	TOTAL INTERIOR WALLS					\$1,780.00
<i>Div. 20</i>	<i>Trim/Millwork</i>					
1850	Pine modern/colonial base 3 1/4	LF	35	0.95	33.25	
1986	Door Casing	LF	85	0.40	34.00	
L1850	Pine modern/colonial base	LF	35	0.49	17.15	
L1955	12" wire shelving	LF	100	4.00	400.00	
L1986	Door Casing	LF	85	0.80	68.00	
	TOTAL TRIM MILLWORK					\$552.40
<i>Div. 23</i>	<i>Floor Covering</i>					
5225	Ceramic tile floor w/trim	SF	22	10.00	220.00	
	TOTAL FLOOR COVERING					\$220.00
<i>Div. 25</i>	<i>Clean-up</i>					
L5502	Bathroom or kitchen	EA	1	67.00	67.00	
L5525	Haul away from job site	EA	2	100.00	100.00	
L550	Jay's hours	HR	18	13.00	234.00	
	TOTAL CLEAN-UP					\$501.00
	SUBTOTAL					\$5,234.54
	T/L MULTIPLIER:					1.0000
	ADJUSTED SUBTOTAL					\$5,234.54
	JOB OVERHEAD:				(20%)	\$1,046.91
	OVERHEAD:				(20%)	\$1,046.91
	PROFIT:				(20%)	\$1,046.91
	PROFESSIONAL FEES:					—
	BOND:					—
TOTAL PROJECT COST:						\$8,375.27

What you thought was going to be a dream come true turned out to be a nightmare, and you're frustrated beyond words.

Well, help is on the way. And it's in the form of audio cassettes from FlipTrack Learning Systems, 999 Main Street, Dept. 586, Glen Ellyn, IL 60137-3572; 800/222-FLIP.

Fliptrack's training tapes are designed to help you wade through the learning phase with many of the country's most popular software programs - and hardware too. Want to learn how to use the IBM-compatible AT, the

Macintosh, the Apple, WordPerfect, R:base, or Microsoft Excel? You can with FlipTrack.

The system works well for both starters and advanced users. I found myself listening to the tapes in my truck. And even though they are made for simultaneous use while sitting at the computer, I learned a ton during my regular days' activities while driving from job to job.

I used FlipTrack three years ago to learn how to use Lotus 1-2-3. I was able to get up and running in less than an hour and was truly impressed.

The tapes range in price from \$89 to \$295; most are in the \$100 price range. ■

Morris D. Carey is a partner with Carey Bros. Construction, a successful remodeling firm based in Pittsburg, Calif. In addition, he is an author and lecturer and has reviewed hundreds of construction-related computer products. If you have a questions about computing in construction, address it to State of the Art Contractor, c/o The Journal of Light Construction, RR#2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477