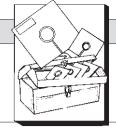
STATE-OF-THE-ART CONTRACTOR

Database: A Powerful Tool

by Craig Savage



If you are just beginning to use a computer in your business, one of the first things you should do is establish a database of all your contacts, like clients, subs, and vendors. Create a "field" for each piece of information (name, address, phone number, etc.). A field labeled Type, for example, might include a description of a sub's trade, such as "concrete" or "electrical," or a vendor's specialty, like "hardware." Other fields can hold information about the person's strengths and weaknesses, their qualifications, and even random notes about your past relationship with them.

All of the fields for each contact are stored as a "record" in the database. The power of a database lies in its ability to run speedy searches and "find" only the records holding the information you want. In the simplest case, you might run a search for a specific name, and the database will find the corresponding address and phone number. Some databases will even dial the phone for you. One search I find very valuable lists everyone whose entry in the "type" field is the same as the key word I specify — "concrete," for example. I merge the names and addresses on this list with a form letter that requests them to bid, and I put it in a windowed envelope, which saves me from having to address the letters.

Microsoft Works (Microsoft Corp., One Microsoft Way, Redmond, WA 98052; 800/426-9400) and Claris Works (Claris Corp., Box 526, Santa Clara, CA 95052; 800/325-2747) are just two of the many integrated applications whose databases will perform the tasks just mentioned. You can also use dedicated databases, like Filemaker Pro (Claris) or Touchbase (After Hours Software, 5990 Sepulveda Blvd., Suite 240, Van Nuys, CA 91411; 818/780-2220), or use the database capabilities built into spreadsheets like Excel (Microsoft), Resolve (Claris), or Lotus 1-2-3 Mac (Lotus Development Corp., 61 Medford St., Somerville, MA 02143; 800/872-3387).

My database is always up and running on my screen, and I use it often to search for phone numbers. If you

make 25 calls a day and save 30 seconds a call with its find-and-dial capabilities, that's 12 minutes a day or an hour a week that you have to devote to something else.

Mail Merge

That "something else" had better be marketing if you want to survive in today's construction market. And the database can help you do that, too. A letter to former clients, for example, is a cinch with your contacts list. "Mail merge" means taking the addresses from your database and combining them with the text of a letter. Simply do a search for all the contacts whose type matches "client" or whatever key word you use to identify a customer, and send them a note.

Remodelers and other service-oriented contractors, like hvac and plumbing contractors, can use mail merge to do blanket mailings using lists purchased from on-line data services. In California, you can

subscribe to services like *Dataquick Information Systems* (9171 Towne Center Dr., Suite 600, San Diego, CA 92122; 800/888-4492) or *Damar* (TRW Ready Property Data, 3610 Central Ave., Riverside, CA 92506; 800/873-2627), which let you "log on" using your computer and a modem and "download" (transfer over the phone lines) tax rolls. Put the information you get into your database, where you can merge the addresses with a form letter.

For example, if my company is working in a certain neighborhood, I do a mailing to the houses within a one-mile radius of the site. I explain that we are doing a remodel nearby, and ask them to please give us a call if they are considering renovation. On-line databases let you do selective searches so you can narrow down your target market to houses over 20 years old, for example, or houses appraised at over \$250,000. You pay 5¢ for the name and address, 29¢ for the postage, and 4¢

for the computer paper and envelope. That's 38¢ for a letter that goes directly into the hands of the people most likely to need your services. A nondescript \$150 ad in the yellow pages, which only makes you look like every other nondescript contractor in your area, costs the same as 400 letters to the market that matters most. Title companies and some Chambers of Commerce will also provide you with databases of names and addresses.

Price Book

The power of a database doesn't stop with mail merges. The price book every contractor should keep (but which few do with any consistency) is easy to compile in a database. Using Excel's spreadsheet and database features, I have built a database that I call my Costbook (see Figure 1). It's divided into 12 divisions based on the Construction Specifications Institute (CSI) system — Site Work, Concrete,

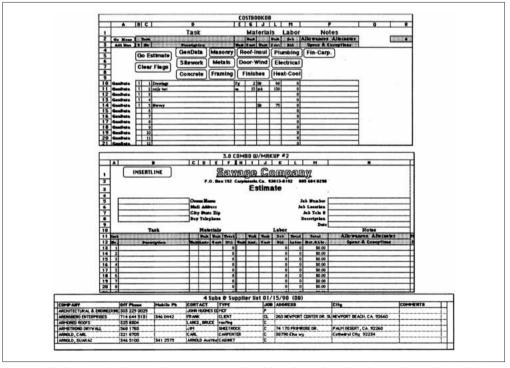


Figure 1. The database at the bottom of this screen contains a list of the author's subs and suppliers. At the top, the Costbook contains macro buttons (such as GenData, Sitework, Concrete) in the spreadsheet Excel to help speed item selection. The GO ESTIMATE macro collects flagged items in a format which can be "cut and pasted" into the Estimate spreadsheet.

Framing, and so on — and I have made sure it works with my estimating template in the spreadsheet. I create the estimate by checking off items in the cost book. When I run into an item that isn't in the book, I add it "on the fly." The net result is a system that lets you create your cost book and update it as you make estimates.

Like other spreadsheets, Excel lets you create "macros" — a sequence of operations (like selecting specific cells and scrolling to them) that you can record and then assign to a single button or keystroke. When you click on the button (or press the key), it "plays back" the operations in the order they were created. It makes working in my Costbook seem automatic.

Of course nothing in computing is really automatic. It might take you a month of nights to get your own cost book working. But in the end, it will be worth it. Not only will you learn to use your spreadsheet and database, but you will be well on your way to creating your own construction forms and linking them together in a system that fits your business style. This may be preferable to buying an off-the-shelf database written for the construction industry, and spending an equal amount of time learning its intricacies only to discover that it doesn't work the way you do.

Craig Savage, a longtime builder and Macintosh user, owns Savage Co., in Carpenteria, Calif., and publishes the Macintosh Construction Forum (208/263-3078). He alternates this column with Morris Carey, who writes about IBM-compatible systems. If you have a question about computing in construction, send it to State-of-the-Art Contractor, JLC, RR2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477.

Computer Bytes

An external shield called ELF Pro-Tech is said to block the extremely low frequency (ELF) magnetic fields produced by computer monitors. Prices range from \$65 to \$131, depending on the number of panels needed. For more information, contact NoRad, 1549 11th St., Santa Monica, CA 90401; 800/262-3260.

PC flea markets can be an inexpensive source of computer products. For an admission price of under \$10, you can see and buy everything from brand-name software (check the version number) to printer cables and modems, floppy disks and fanfold paper. If you're in the market for a complete computer system, you may find a bargain, as long as you look for a standard warranty and know enough to ask intelligent questions. If you're still a novice, take someone along who knows what to look for. Check newspapers, computer magazines,

and local user groups for announcements of upcoming shows.

An add-on module called Precision Buyout has been released by Timberline Software. The \$1,490 package uses information generated in the company's Precision Estimating software to automatically request, track, and compare vendor quotes, select vendors, and monitor the difference between estimated prices and vendor quotes. For more information, contact Timberline Software Corp., 9600 S.W. Nimbus, Beaverton, OR 97005; 800/628-6583.

The Kohler Plumbing Symbols
Library is an AutoCAD-compatible
system for specifying over 200 Kohler
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\$44.95 from Kohler Co., P.O. Box
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800/433-6287. — Sal Alfano