



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,

COSTBOOK DB											
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36
37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48
49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60
61	62	63	64	65	66	67	68	69	70	71	72
73	74	75	76	77	78	79	80	81	82	83	84
85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96
97	98	99	100	101	102	103	104	105	106	107	108
109	110	111	112	113	114	115	116	117	118	119	120
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133	134	135	136	137	138	139	140	141	142	143	144
145	146	147	148	149	150	151	152	153	154	155	156
157	158	159	160	161	162	163	164	165	166	167	168
169	170	171	172	173	174	175	176	177	178	179	180
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217	218	219	220	221	222	223	224	225	226	227	228
229	230	231	232	233	234	235	236	237	238	239	240
241	242	243	244	245	246	247	248	249	250	251	252
253	254	255	256	257	258	259	260	261	262	263	264
265	266	267	268	269	270	271	272	273	274	275	276
277	278	279	280	281	282	283	284	285	286	287	288
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445	446	447	448	449	450	451	452	453	454	455	456
457	458	459	460	461	462	463	464	465	466	467	468
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529	530	531	532	533	534	535	536	537	538	539	540
541	542	543	544	545	546	547	548	549	550	551	552
553	554	555	556	557	558	559	560	561	562	563	564
565	566	567	568	569	570	571	572	573	574	575	576
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601	602	603	604	605	606	607	608	609	610	611	612
613	614	615	616	617	618	619	620	621	622	623	624
625	626	627	628	629	630	631	632	633	634	635	636
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697	698	699	700	701	702	703	704	705	706	707	708
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829	830	831	832	833	834	835	836	837	838	839	840
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853	854	855	856	857	858	859	860	861	862	863	864
865	866	867	868	869	870	871	872	873	874	875	876
877	878	879	880	881	882	883	884	885	886	887	888
889	890	891	892	893	894	895	896	897	898	899	900
901	902	903	904	905	906	907	908	909	910	911	912
913	914	915	916	917	918	919	920	921	922	923	924
925	926	927	928	929	930	931	932	933	934	935	936
937	938	939	940	941	942	943	944	945	946	947	948
949	950	951	952	953	954	955	956	957	958	959	960
961	962	963	964	965	966	967	968	969	970	971	972
973	974	975	976	977	978	979	980	981	982	983	984
985	986	987	988	989	990	991	992	993	994	995	996
997	998	999	1000	1001	1002	1003	1004	1005	1006	1007	1008
1009	1010	1011	1012	1013	1014	1015	1016	1017	1018	1019	1020
1021	1022	1023	1024	1025	1026	1027	1028	1029	1030	1031	1032
1033	1034	1035	1036	1037	1038	1039	1040	1041	1042	1043	1044
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1057	1058										

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 Carpinteria, 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 residential and commercial fixtures in plan-view drawings and front and side elevations. The package costs \$44.95 from Kohler Co., P.O. Box 23958, Milwaukee, WI 53223; 800/433-6287. — *Sal Alfano*