



Paper-Free Fax

by Craig Savage

The chop saw and the cordless drill are indispensable site tools. Many builders who purchased them only after years of indecision now wonder how they ever got along without them. In the office, the fax machine — and now the fax/modem — fall into the same category. Users familiar with fax machines know how valuable it is to have an invoice or brochure faxed to them in little more than the time it takes to dial a phone number. The fax/modem, which works in conjunction with a computer, adds a new dimension to office management by allowing you to create, store, manipulate, send, and receive documents electronically — without printouts, copies, or faded and curled images.

What Is a Fax/Modem?

A fax/modem is either an internal plug-in card or an external box that sends electronic documents, like word processor files or CAD drawings, via the telephone lines to a fax machine or another fax/modem. Fax/modems handle files in a special fax format that, with the proper fax software, can be viewed on screen, printed out, or scanned and stored as text. Fax software also allows you to edit, annotate, and make notes on received documents, then transmit them back to the sender.



A fax/modem lets you send and receive documents over the phone lines without having to print them on paper.

The price tag for fax/modems is now as low as \$250 and continues to drop. With prices that low, you can easily afford to keep in tune with the most current standards. I recommend a fax/modem with a speed of 14,400 bps (baud per second) and V.32bis (an error-checking and data compression standard). A 2,400 bps fax/modem will get you started, but will greatly reduce the speed of your transmissions.

Paper-Free

One of the advantages of using a fax/modem is that many docu-

ments created on a computer won't ever have to be printed: They can simply be transmitted and then stored on the hard disk (and properly backed up, of course). This saves paper, ink, and storage space while making storing and retrieving them a simple matter of using a search function. The same holds true for received faxes: They can be viewed and stored, and even annotated and re-transmitted, with an electronic copy of the revision saved to your hard disk along with the original.

Contractors need to rethink the tools they use to communicate. With judicious use of a fax/modem, you can get a lot of work done. A fax communicates instantly. And unlike a letter, you know that the fax has been received and when, because most fax software gives you an audit trail of fax activity. A fax is also succinct. The brief, straightforward format demands a response, and cuts out the pleasantries without being rude. Properly set up, a laptop computer with a built-in fax/modem can spit out dozens of queries, notes, shop drawings, and memos with a couple of clicks of the mouse.

Fax Software

Good fax software has many built-in functions that can turn arduous chores into simple tasks. For example, most fax software operates "in the background" so you can continue to work on other computer tasks while sending or receiving a fax. The built-in phone books in Mac and Windows fax software make sending a fax as easy as dragging the destination phone number into the Send box, or selecting Print Fax from inside an application's File menu. All fax software includes canned fax cover sheets, and some let you customize the cover sheet with your company logo. Most programs make it easy to combine several documents into a single fax. Some also have Quick Fax options that let you send a memo all by itself.

The Group Send function is particularly adaptable to construction practices. After picking names from the software's phone book and grouping them by trade or project, you can simultaneously "broadcast" one fax to every name in the group. Plumbers, for example, could make up one group so you could send them all a

request for bid during a single broadcast fax. Or you could group all the subs for the Jones project and fax them all an updated job timeline automatically each Monday morning.

One of the newest functions of fax software is Optical Character Recognition (OCR), which "reads" fax images and converts them into word processor format (ASCII text). Fax documents that have been scanned by OCR software can be edited in a word processor and then re-faxed. In fact, if you own a regular fax machine as well as a fax/modem, you can put long documents, like contracts and spec forms, into your computer by sending yourself a fax (fax machine to fax/modem) and then using OCR to translate the documents into word processor format. This sure saves a lot of typing.

Another handy fax software feature called Markup lets you add notes and sketches to a fax as a separate layer, and then re-send it. I do this daily from my laptop in the job shack.

Sources

Fax/modems are cheap and getting cheaper. For Mac users, Global Village Communications (685 E. Middlefield Rd., Bldg. B, Mountain View, CA 94043; 800/736-4821) makes top-of-the-line hardware and fax software. SupraModem (Supra Corp., 7101 Supra Dr. S.W., Albany, OR 97321; 800/727-3564) makes fax/modems that include software called FaxSTF (STF Technologies, Jct. I-70 and Hwy. 23, Concordia, MO 64020; 816/463-2021), a stable workhorse program with all the basic functions you'll need.

Windows users are in an even better position because of the competition in hardware and software. I recommend the Zoom FAX VFP V.32bis modem (Zoom Telephonics, 207 South St., Boston, MA 02111; 800/666-6191), which also works with Macs and comes with FaxSTF. If you already own a fax/modem and just need software, Delrina's FaxPro (Delrina Corp., 6830 Via Del Oro, Suite 200, San Jose, CA 95119; 800/268-6082) is a top contender. FaxPro has all the bells and whistles mentioned, including OCR, and my experience with it and Delrina's technical support has been excellent. ■

Craig Savage, a longtime builder and Macintosh user, owns Savage Co., in Carpinteria, Calif., and publishes the Macintosh Construction Forum and Windows On Construction. If you have a question about computing in construction, address it to State-of-the-Art Contractor, JLC, RR#2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477.