SELLING THE SIZZLE

SOFTWARE COURTESY OF PILOT SOFTWARE

LIZ HEANEY

Now that home computers are big business, it is increasingly marketing, rather than manufacturing, that makes or breaks a product. Whether you are selling a games package or a new business computer with a considerable marketing budget, the crucial factor is creating the right 'product image'.

Marketing is the business of building a bridge between the product that the sellers have to sell and the pockets of the would-be buyers. In designing a bridge that will encourage and support the maximum amount of traffic, the marketeers have to make guesses (sometimes based on market research) about the needs, desires and whims of their public, and then back those guesses with heavy investment. For example, the recent Macintosh launch at its peak was costing £1 million a month in the UK alone.

Marketing decisions begin to be made when the production of a new machine is in the planning stage. What functions the machine will have, how many units are to be built, and how much can be spent manufacturing each unit are all factors that will affect the marketing.

Similar considerations apply to software marketing. It is no good spending huge sums developing and selling a game that will have to cost more than its potential buyers can afford if it is to recoup its investment. But a software house that stints on development will be left having to sell a product that is short on features, or bug-ridden, or both, thus running the risk of bringing its brand name into disrepute, with a potentially harmful effect on future products. If it spends a lot on development but nothing on marketing, it will be left with a splendid product that nobody knows about.

It is also important to determine at an early stage where the product fits in relation to similar goods available in the shops. It is here that the 'image' of the product becomes vital. The makers of cigarettes and soap powder share a difficulty — if the truth be told, one product is pretty much like another. Computer hardware manufacturers are not quite in this position, but it isn't always easy to explain precisely the individual character of a machine to first-time buyers who will probably not understand the fine technical points. Games and business application software, too, often reveal their best features only after they've been bought and used.

For this reason, hardware and software manufacturers, like the makers of cigarettes and soap powder, resort to the creation of a 'product image', a sort of short-hand psychological projection of the product. It is more effective to