

POST HASTE

One of the most onerous tasks of office workers and club secretaries is having to sit in front of piles of envelopes, writing or typing out addresses. To create an effective mailing system for a home micro all you need is a printer, a word processing package and a database program.

Computerised mailing can go a lot further than the simple printing of address labels. In fact, if all we needed was a way of addressing envelopes, the word processor would not be necessary. A database package would be sufficient, since setting up a name and address file is very simple on a standard database. Although each name and address record would initially have to be input field by field, once the whole system was set up we would be able to use the database package, time after time, to generate as many labels as we needed.

Since database packages, if they are any good, have some sophisticated reporting facilities, it would be possible to select the labels to be printed according to certain criteria: for instance, all

addresses with London in the town field. This would take care of selecting and addressing the labels on the envelopes, but it would still leave the user with the other half of a boring job to do. If, for example, the purpose of all the addressing of envelopes was to send a standard letter to a particular set of customers, it would also be necessary to type the addresses on each of the letters.

Furthermore, each customer would have his own address and name on the letter, but the text of the letter itself would remain anonymous and impersonal. There is little point, for example, in leaving gaps in the text to be filled in later with each customer's name, since names differ in length. You would have to leave gaps large enough for the longest name you wanted to include, and the 'personalised' letter that resulted would look phoney. So personalising the letter would mean retyping it as many times as there are names on the mailing list.

The ideal solution to this problem is to arrange the system so that the user can compose a standard letter using all the facilities of a word processor, and then have the computer automatically pull the relevant details for each customer off a database file to add personalised details to each individual letter.

There are a number of ways of doing this. One of the simplest is that taken by two disk-based packages produced by Acorn — Memoplan and Fileplan, a word processor and a database respectively. Both of these packages come as part of a selection of software given away by Acorn to purchasers of its Z80 second processor for the BBC Model B micro.

The packages cannot produce personalised letters independently and must be used together. The name and address details have to be set up in Fileplan and the standard letter (or form) is created using Memoplan. Each field in the name and address file is numbered, and at relevant points in the standard letter the user simply types in the number of the field whose contents need to be transferred to the letter. The computer will then work through the mailing list sequentially and the contents of the field numbers for all the relevant records on the file will appear in the standard letter.

The word processor automatically adjusts the surrounding text so that the recipients receive a letter that looks as if it has been personally written to them. Memoplan also allows the person setting up the standard letter to include a reminder to help identify the contents of a particular field. For example, 2(SURNAME) indicates that the second field contains the surnames of all recipients.

Specialised mailing packages aimed at business

Date
Current date supplied by software

AIDA
CONSTRUCTION

54 Garibaldi Buildings
Cavour Terrace
Manchester 8
6 June 1984

Correspondence Address
From database
Mazzini Associates Inc.
22, Solferino Street
Cowdenbeath
Scotland

Reference
From database
Your Reference: WM/3258

Name
From database
Dear Ms Mazzini,

Subject
From database
We were delighted to receive your letter of 3 June 1984 inviting us to bid for the Risorgimento Piazza contract.

Date
Correspondence date from database
6 June 1984

Our contracts department is preparing a tender at this moment, and it will be delivered to your Cowdenbeath premises within a month.

Yours sincerely

Ellen Terry
President

Location
From database