VERTICAL TAKEOFF

'Vertical software' is programmers' jargon for specialised applications written for people like doctors, lawyers, designers, journalists, photographers and caterers. But often, generalised packages can be used in a special way, or can be customised for specific end-uses.

A great many uses exist for personal computers, and many of these applications are not readily apparent. They have developed as a result of creative adaptation of existing software, or the generation of special-use software. These are said to be 'vertical market' applications because they apply to a specific group of people, such as doctors, chemists or psychologists. In the series of articles we begin here, we will be looking at a number of vertical market packages that show off interesting new facets of microcomputer usage. The following examples will help to illustrate the kind of problems vertical market software is designed to solve.

A group of parents of teenage heroin addicts in London's West End is using Caxton Software's BrainStorm program for planning its campaign to spread awareness of their activities among local doctors, social workers and law enforcement agencies. A Kent restaurateur is using a Practicalc spreadsheet to analyse what customers are ordering, so that he can plan his future menus. A Sussex houseplant nursery is using the same program — working with four Commodore 64s — to handle everything from its large import project to controlling energy costs. A surgeon at a London hospital is using the Superbase program from Precision Software to help in his research into the causes and cure of cancer.

Chemists throughout Britain are using computers to comply with the new recommendation that all labels for patients' prescriptions must be printed, not handwritten. Kitchen designer Alan Batton of Warrington, Lancashire, uses a program — devised by a couple of snooker-playing friends to run on a BBC Micro — for shuffling stoves and fridges and other kitchen fitments around on a screen-based plan of the space available. In fact, it's been so effective in aiding his kitchen (and bedroom) fittings business, that he has gone into partnership with the program's original designers to offer the system to other retailers.

These are just a few examples of new answers to that time-honoured query from the prospective purchaser of a new computer: 'What can it do?' It's been estimated that the average computer user exploits no more than 10 per cent of the machine's capabilities — and that may be an over-estimate. Spending £200 or more on something that is then limited to one end-use, whether it be playing games or managing your accounts, is not as cost effective as exploiting its versatility to the full.

There are two ways of doing this. One option is to find new applications for standard software. Mike Ford, a professional photographer in Sheffield, uses the stock control module in the Anagram Integrated Accounts package to manage his library of photographs, which forces his file copies of prints and transparencies from past assignments to earn their keep. Similarly, some employment agencies use Tomorrow's Office database for matching the needs of their clients to the manpower available, keeping curricula vitae data on hard disk and mailing this out automatically. This is much cheaper than using packages designed for the job: it costs over a thousand pounds for AP Computer Consultants' Body Matching and Marketing package.

CUSTOM DESIGNED

The alternative is to seek a package designed for the special use you require. Imagine that you are a student of theology whose study desk is over-burdened with massive tomes, concordances, commentaries, Bible dictionaries and the like. Well, then you may need 'The Word' Processor from Bible Research Systems for the IBM and compatibles. This package includes the entire King James translation with full search facilities for the creation of cross-references on disk.

And if you are suspicious of all translations of biblical material, you can check it out in the original with a program called The Greek Transliterator, which will give you the Greek equivalent of any English word or phrase, and display every occurrence in the English text. This allows you to compare the various ways in which a word has been translated. Such electronic Bible study is not cheap, however. Those two programs will set you back £253 each.

Let's consider another package, which at first would seem equally unlikely. If you're an engineer planning storm drains and sewers, then MIDUSS — the McMaster Interactive Design of Stormwater Systems — will help you to size pipes, channels and storage ponds, allow you to generate hydrographs, and give screen dumps of your high resolution graphics work. To achieve all this, you'll need a 256K Sirius, plus nearly £750 for the software.

Sewage systems seem to have provided programmers with a lot of stimulus. The rugged