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What Else Does It Do?

by *STEVE ROSS*

More and more people are investing in personal computers. But personal computers are often purchased with only one or two real applications in mind. Many personal computer owners are not programmers, and have no intention of learning to program now, or in the future.

As a programmer, I can sympathize with anyone who would rather not. Good programming requires a tremendous investment of time, and frustration. The frustration never seems to completely go away. The question many non-programmers are asking themselves is what else can that nicely packaged machine do for me?

Once, the personal computer was only for the "hobbyist" — a person who enjoyed programming everything from the ground up. Now, there are numerous firms who specialize in putting together packaged programs for a new market of people who want to use computers, but are not inclined to do the programming.

The emergence of these software packages has opened a new vista for personal computing. Unfortunately, many people are unaware of what all these programs can do for them, and even for those who do see the potential, selecting the right one from the jungle of offerings is intimidating, to say the least!

The most popular "canned" program, by far, is the "spread-sheet" calculator program. Spread-sheet programs lend themselves extremely well to financial analysis of a non-technical nature. A good spread-sheet application is variance analysis of profit and loss. Several major corporations are currently using personal computers and spread-sheet calculators to plan various segments of their business. Other applications vary from personal tax preparation to facility productivity analysis. The most popular of the spread-sheet programs is VisiCalc®

Another extremely widespread personal-computer application is word processing. Many people are not particularly good typists, yet they would like to produce perfect letters, or form letters. Electronic word-processing makes typing errors simple to correct. Text is simple to move from one part of a document to another. In addition, the document can be stored on magnetic disk for future reference (periodic mailings, etc.). There are many offerings at many different prices, each program with a different level of functionality. The selection of an appropriate word-processor is an extremely confusing problem, but the rule to follow when selecting one is: Know up-front what you need the program for, and the level of functionality you require. If you follow that rule, you will be spared the problem of getting (and paying for) more than you need.

Another handy piece of software is the data manager. This might possibly be the most confusing type of software in computing today. The main emphasis in data management is to organize data in a logical manner that will facilitate quick retrieval (searching), and easy reporting. The main problem with these packages is that as they increase in functionality, they increase in complexity to the point where the user is, to all intents and purposes, programming. Exercising the rule of "don't buy more than you need" will help keep you in a realm where you can comfortably function. These programs are best for simple tasks such as keeping track of your supplies at home and for complex systems, matching employees to job

positions by several skill criteria, and produce prioritized, sorted lists. A few examples of the available data management software are: Personal Filing System © and DB Master©

Now, if your personal computer is just sitting there being unproductive, perhaps it's time you invested a little time learning more about what it can do for you, and by all means, if you feel the urge, give programming a shot!

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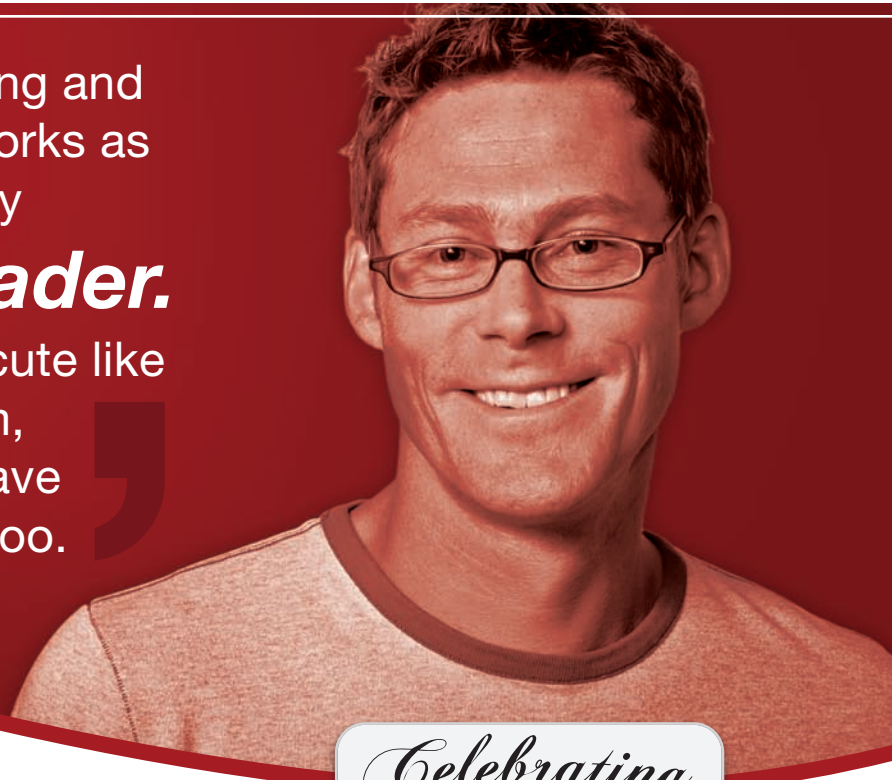
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