

POINT AND CLICK:

■ You own a landscaping business and need to send a personalized advertising letter to customers describing a new maintenance service. What's the cheapest and simplest alternative?

It's income tax time and you must know the exact amount of your profits, losses and outstanding debts in order to file an honest return. How can you do this easily and quickly?

Your business badly needs a new truck and other expensive landscaping equipment. How can you easily figure all costs and correctly estimate the probable return on investment?

The answer to all such problems—and more—can be summed up in three words: *use a computer.*

And today, it's not hard to learn from scratch how to use computers. With the advent of recent user-friendly programs using Windows and Macintosh technology, mastering computers is not nearly as difficult as it was 10 years ago. Today, instead of having to enter long strings of command characters to get your computer to perform a function, in many instances all you have to do is click a mouse on an icon and voilà!

But if you, like many other people in the green industry, are still reluctant to conduct a foray into the computer world, these answers to some questions can help.

1) What can a computer really do to improve my business?

In addition to finding solutions to problems such as the above, it can control your inventory; keep accounts receivable and payable in order; help hire employees and check their work; analyze, promote, and design your ads; and check your profits.

Also, if you purchase a modem and subscribe to an on-line information service like Prodigy, you can be on-line with other computer users and share a variety of information that can be valuable in your day-to-day operations.

2) How can I learn more about computers?

● First, check out a book from the library. Master "computerese" so you can understand descriptions concerning what a computer can and cannot do, and how.

● Take some lessons on how to use a computer. Some are offered by computer dealers, others can be scheduled through your local junior or community college or adult education classes.

● Study computer magazines such as *Byte* and *Info World*. There are also periodicals for owners of specific computers such as

PC World for the IBM PC and *MacWorld* for the Apple Macintosh. They're available at many libraries.

● Join a computer-oriented club whose members already own computers. These people will usually be glad to answer any questions you might have.

3) Where should I shop for a suitable computer?

Check local retail computer stores. Discuss your business and its needs with a knowledgeable salesperson. Take

careful notes, making sure you cross-reference the computer name with additional components you might need, tasks it can handle, price and other data. Shop around!

4) What questions are important to ask before selecting specific computer software?

● Is it easy to understand and follow what appears on the screen?

● If offered a computer package, does it include a double-entry system?

● Can all transactions be tracked easily so that mistakes can be found and corrected quickly?

● Is there a built-in safeguard that will save information when mistakes are made?

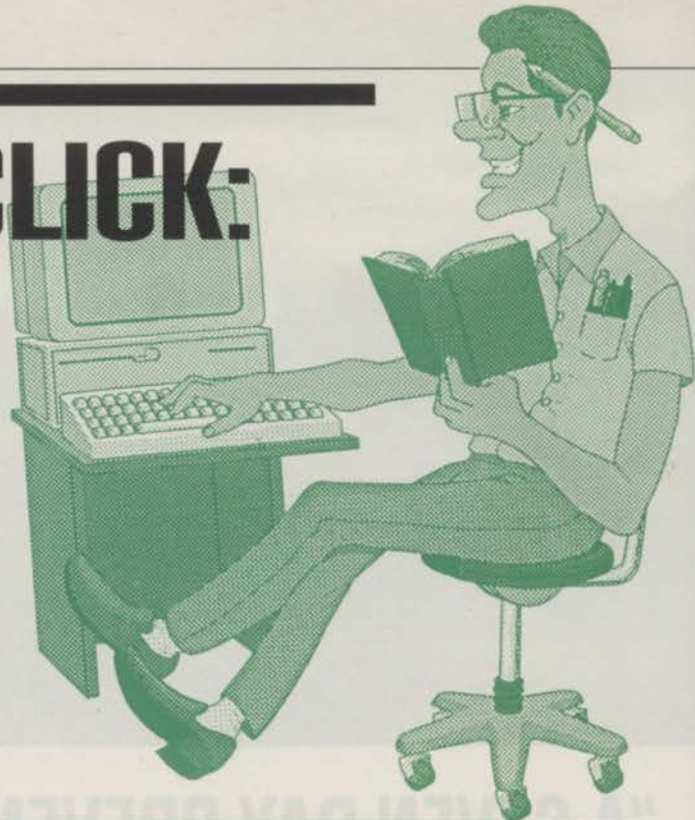
● Can you purchase one program and add to it as your expertise develops?

● Will the manufacturer continue to improve its software and offer it as part of its computer service?

● Does the company support its software with trained personnel, seminars, user manuals and a hotline number?

● Is the manual easy to read? Does it contain diagrams, charts and a troubleshooting guide?

● Does the company offer a guarantee which fully covers the product if you're not



powering your business with the new computers

completely satisfied?

5) What important questions should be asked before selecting specific computer hardware?

● Will it operate the software you've selected?

● Does it have at least 64K of memory, expandable to at least 125K?

● Does the disk system have the storage to make the whole system run rapidly while allowing for future growth?

● Does the screen have 80 characters, which allows it to show all the information you need to see?

● Is the keyboard typewriter style?

● Is there a number pad to make accounting entries easier?

● Is the computer able to accept the type of printer that will yield the kind of finished work you need?

6) About how much should I pay?

Since prices are now at an all-time low, many business people feel that computerizing their businesses as an experiment can be worth a possible loss, which can be written off later. (However, such losses are rare.)

—Bess Ritter May