



Estimator Updates

by Morris D. Carey, Jr.

The more sales slow down, the more closely you have to watch your business. It is best to be positive and not dwell on an economic downturn, but to disregard a man taking a swing at you, means you might get punched. To avoid the punch, you must be prepared, which in business means using a computer.

As a builder I met at a seminar put it, a computer enables a small contractor to get his office work done more efficiently, leaving more time to get construction work done. I agree with that statement, but must add that the big money in construction is not made by the tradesperson: it is made — and saved — by the business person.

The best time to start with a computer is when your business is small. At that point, fewer entries need to be made and reports are easier to interpret and track. It is more difficult to convert to a computer when you have the business income to support it.

Without one, however, you might never reach that point. According to the California Contractors State License Board, contractors fail more often as a result of poor business skills than for all other reasons combined.

Master Builder Version 6

For those of you with computers, *Master Builder*, by Omware, Rhonert Park, Calif., offers an integrated accounting and estimating system that is tops. It's not cheap, priced between \$3,000 and \$6,000 depending on the modules you need, but it's one of the best.

Accounts payable and accounts receivable modules are not required for smaller businesses, which can help keep the initial cost down. General ledger, payroll, job costing, and estimating are the important modules for a novice to consider.

Among the new features in the latest release, Version 6, are a purchase-order module and a change-order module. Being able to put that information in a distinct place makes tracking those details a breeze.

The program is also equipped with pop-up help screens, and fully functional data windows. Moving between windows, modules, and other parts of the program is also very fast. Menus are clear and easy to understand, and on-screen help is context sensitive. Context sensitive help means that how-to information about the part of the program where the cursor is located pops on the screen when the "help" key is pressed.

Another interesting feature is an easily accessible note pad, which makes tracking special events very easy. The estimating system also allows making entries without needing to return to a maintenance screen, a bonus many other programs don't offer.

Although the estimating module (*Master Builder* calls it Power Takeoff) has also been improved, cost-control options at the part (item) level are still limited. The main restriction is that subcontractor estimates can only be expressed as a single subcontractor price without allowing a division between costs and markup. The problem with that system is that when the estimate is reviewed a few years later, it may be hard to remember how much was markup and how much was cost.

Version 6 is far more complicated and substantially more powerful than its predecessor, which is why it takes more time to learn.

Timberline's Precision Extended

Precision Extended, the latest release from Timberline Corp., Beaverton, Ore., is the best estimating program I have ever seen for power users. The preprogrammed estimating package can be reprogrammed to fit any need. If there aren't enough fields at the item level in the database, you can add up to 12 of your own. Call them whatever you want. They can be sorted later at bid time.

The typical problem with preprogrammed software is that the programmer doesn't know the particulars of your business, so something always seems to be missing.

Nothing is missing in *Extended*. Besides user-definable fields, the program incorporates a user-friendly programming language. The estimator can create formulas with "if-then-else" statements (and other logic), which can be nested. For example, an operator can write a formula for use during takeoff that works as follows: *if* this quantity is entered *then* use that formula or *else* use a predetermined number from a table, which can also be user defined.

Searching for an item in the bid or database — or anywhere in the program — is comprehensive and lightning-fast. Database item coding is alphanumeric. That means that the codes used to identify data can be letters, numbers, or both — no need to change your present identification method.

The best addition to *Extended* is the change made for those who want to deal with one item at a time from the database. Most systems require the estimator to do a takeoff in two steps: First, extract the item from the database, and then enter a quantity.

In *Extended*, item takeoff can be done simply by opening the database and entering quantities. Every item that gets a quantity is automatically thrown into the estimate. The program goes one step further by allowing items to be marked for inclusion in the estimate, and if the proper formulas have been created at set-up time, values for all like quantities are made as a single entry. Hot stuff!

Extended also gives users the power to create a specifications book and to code groups of items to those specifications. That way, as estimating is happening, a spec book is being created. Will you get the specification twice if a work package is used twice? Nope. One is all you need and that's all you'll get — no duplications.

Extended is not for the novice in price or ease of use. At \$3,000, *Extended* is not cheap, but it is the best buy on the market when you weigh cost versus value.

By the way, all of the other *Precision* series estimating programs are

good: *Precision Light* for beginners, *Precision Estimating* for intermediate users, and *Precision Plus* for advanced users.

A Reader Writes

Aldon Malechas, owner of Drafting Plush, Ludington, Mich., writes: "I purchased two software programs on December 1, 1989 from Omni Consultants of Dallas, Texas. The two programs were PlanFinder 2.1 and Construction Management System (CMS). Money back was guaranteed if the software programs were returned in 30 days. On December 20, 1989 I returned the CMS.

The programs were time-locked and encrypted, but the company still had me send in a notarized affidavit in order to obtain my refund. Instead of sending my refund, however, they sent another CMS program. I also returned it. As of October, 1990, I have not as yet received my \$614 refund."

In addition to his letter, Aldon sent a copy of a letter he received from Omni. It was signed by the president of the company and confirmed some of his claims.

This is not the way software companies should treat their customers. Read Aldon's lips, Omni, he doesn't want your accounting software. He wants his money back.

I reviewed PlanFinder and found it to be a pretty good design tool. However, I couldn't get CMS to load or run. So, there is no telling what it can do. I only spoke to Omni once. The fellow at the other end of the line was very rude. I wondered if CMS was as bad as his attitude. ■

Morris D. Carey is a partner with Carey Bros. Construction, a remodeling firm based in Pittsburg, Calif. In addition, he has reviewed hundreds of construction-related computer products and conducts computer seminars. If you have a question about computing in construction, address it to State-of-the-Art Contractor, c/o JLC, RR#2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477.