

STATE-OF-THE-ART CONTRACTOR



Means to an End

by Craig Savage

How many nights have you stayed up late working on an estimate that you couldn't complete until you found a price for just one special item? It was a way of life for me until I discovered construction cost books. Although many of the items in these estimating aids were not exactly what I was looking for, the books' price tables were better than a guess.



MeansData for Spreadsheets (\$395, including 1 database) works with the Windows version of the Excel and Quattro spreadsheets, and with both the DOS and Windows version of Lotus 1-2-3. The program files and one database require 3 to 5

Mb of free disk space. For more information and a demo disk, contact R.S. Means, 100 Construction Plaza, P.O. Box 800, Kingston, MA 02364; 800/448-8182.

Soon after I discovered computers, I noticed that the same cost data was available on disk. But early programs were cumbersome, and it was still easier to flip through the books and enter the information manually.

But times have changed — hard drives are bigger, CPUs are faster, and software is more sophisticated. Most of the applications I've looked at in this column are "stand alone" programs that use their own engine and databases.

The R.S. Means Company, however, has taken a very interesting approach to estimating with their *MeansData for Spreadsheets* software. This program joins electronic versions of the construction cost databases for which Means is famous with one of several popular spreadsheets. The result is a sophisticated estimating package that gives you simple point-and-click access to thousands of line items.

Initial set up. During installation, you are asked to choose the spreadsheet you will be using (the choices are Excel, Lotus 1-2-3, and Quattro). The program then installs a set of spreadsheet templates and macros in your spreadsheet subdirectory, and creates a new subdirectory for the Means database of costs. While trying out the software, I installed both the Repair and Remodeling database and the Residential Construction database (each costs \$100).

You begin a MeansData estimate by launching your spreadsheet in Windows and opening the Means template file (XMEANS.WKS in Excel, the spreadsheet I use). This triggers a macro that takes control of your spreadsheet program, creating a connection between the spreadsheet and the Means database (Figure 1). Hitting the Ctrl-M hot-key combination triggers another macro, which automatically replaces the Excel menu bar with Means's custom menu bar. The program is now ready to start

an estimate. (Before you get to work, however, I recommend you save the template to a new file name so you are not working on the template.)

Databases. Means has prepared over a dozen databases, which fall into two types. The *unit price* databases, like Means cost books, contain individual line items, so your estimate will compile a full bill of materials. The *assembly* databases give a lump sum price for a single task, but do not list the components individually. You can choose to install one type of database or both.

Although you can't directly change anything in a database, you can adjust prices for your geographic area using the "City Select" command from the Global Setup menu. Typing in a two-letter state abbreviation brings up a list of cities in that state. After you choose the nearest city, the program automatically loads the modification table and adjusts all of the database costs automatically.

You can also update prices by subscribing to one of several upgrade plans Means offers to registered users at additional cost. Depending on the terms of your subscription, you'll receive annual database updates as well as new versions of the MeansData program.

To add new items or assemblies, you must create your own database. Selecting the User menu loads a blank template with predefined column headings (Line Number, Description, Unit of Measure, etc.) for either items or assemblies, depending on the type of database you're using. Every custom database you build is added to the list in the User menu.

Building an estimate. The preliminaries are over once you've entered job data (client name, address, phone, bid date, etc.). The first step when building an estimate is to find the part of the database that contains the items you need. The Means program provides several ways to "drill down" to a line item or single assembly. The most direct method is to type in the 10-digit item code, and the program will immediately take you to the item. If you don't remember the code (and who does?), you can use the Book Index Selection screen, which is one level above the line items. For example, several types and sizes of kitchen base cabinets are grouped under the heading

Line #	Description	Unit of Measure	Quantity	Unit Price	Sub	Total
0137 234 00	CONCRETE IN PLACE, GRADE WALLS, 8\"/> <td>CU YD</td> <td>25.00</td> <td>0.00</td> <td></td> <td>207.25</td>	CU YD	25.00	0.00		207.25
0137 234 10	CONCRETE IN PLACE, GRADE WALLS, 12\"/> <td>CU YD</td> <td>20.00</td> <td>0.00</td> <td></td> <td>160.00</td>	CU YD	20.00	0.00		160.00

Figure 1. Using MeansData, items selected from the Means construction cost database are transferred to a spreadsheet (the illustration shows a Microsoft Excel screen), where the estimate data can be manipulated using the spreadsheet's standard commands.

MeansData Assembly User File	
LINE NO	DESC1
0230400000	TestWallAssembly
9999999000	TestWallAssembly

Edit USER Entry	
Line Number	9999999000
Description	TestWallAssembly
Description (continued)	2x4,1/2shtrk,insulation,stucco
Unit of Measure	sf
Material Costs	2.57
Labor Costs	1.25
Equipment Costs	0.25
Man Hours	0.0100

From there, you choose Cabinets Base, and finally the line item selection area.

Using the spreadsheet. At any time during your takeoff, you can transfer items selected or “tagged” in the database to the spreadsheet. To summarize esti-

spreadsheet.

Along with this flexibility, of course, comes the responsibility of knowing how a spreadsheet works. If you’re not careful, you can create problems for yourself. For example, if you scramble the MeansData format by moving cell contents around on the estimate spreadsheet, you won’t be able to import additional data to that file. This isn’t a disaster, because you can always add items by starting a new estimate and combining the spreadsheets later. But it can be annoying. Before you start experimenting, I recommend you make a copy of the estimate spreadsheet, giving it a different filename. ■

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Cabinet Base. Clicking on Cabinet Base takes you to the Line Selection screen within that category of items. The Book Index is alphabetical, and you can scroll through it (it’s a long scroll), or use the Search menu to find full or partial keywords (Figure 2).

The last and longest path to an item is through the Division Selection menu, which is organized according to the 16 CSI divisions. To find Cabinets, for example, you would first choose 06 Woods & Plastics, and at the next level, choose *Architectural Woodwork*.

mate data, the Print menu provides three standard reports — Division, Subdivision, and Detailed. If these don’t meet your needs, however, you can manipulate the estimate data using all of the tools available in the spreadsheet program. In other words, MeansData provides the database and a way to input estimate items into your spreadsheet. From there, you can do anything with the estimate that your spreadsheet program allows, including change prices, quantities, descriptions, and virtually anything else on the