

is there a computer in your life?

Patricia M. Tengel

The future for the use of computers in Extension programming looks bright indeed as we're living in the midst of a very exciting revolution—the electronics revolution. Computers are a part of this revolution. Some say the impact on lifestyles will be greater than all of the changes brought on by the industrial revolution.

Electronics Revolution

Compared to the industrial revolution, the electronics revolution is one of the greatest intellectual achievements of mankind. Through electronics, knowledge is made more readily available. Additionally, electronic instruments, including computers, require little energy. Computers do a good job of managing, storing, retrieving, and distributing information. Their greatest contribution will be to revise the way in which decisions are made.

The potential impact can be compared to the effect of the Gutenberg printing press, which allowed information to be recorded and passed on to the masses. Those who learned to read and write were able to make better decisions than those who didn't.

Because computers have the ability to manipulate information, a new form of literacy is possible. The common man will be able to make decisions on the basis of quantitative data rather than relying solely on experience-based information. It will be Extension's role to help people operate in this new mode.

In the future, Extension's role will be to help our clientele use the information available through computer technology to their best advantage. This includes Extension making available the information necessary to solve problems and helping clientele make decisions based on the larger quantities of information. With the vast quantities of information that

Patricia M. Tengel: Family Resource Management Specialist, Department of Extension Home Economics, University of Maryland—College Park.
Accepted for publication: January, 1979.

will be available, a major program thrust will be to help people become more skilled decision makers as they use the new technology.

In the more distant future, we can imagine the following. Assume the mail service becomes electronic and that each home can receive printed and graphic information on both a television screen and a printing terminal. When a consumer needs information of the type provided by Extension, he/she merely dials the Extension office, enters a code from a catalog list, and receives the information instantaneously.

When this system becomes a reality, we'd avoid printing most bulletins, save trees and paper, and be able to update information immediately. Detailed instructions with accompanying graphics would be possible on a moment's notice for everything from repairing a complicated piece of farm equipment to constructing a fine garment or baking a pie.

The future for the use of computers in Extension programming looks bright indeed as we're living in the midst of a very exciting revolution—the electronics revolution. Computers are a part of this revolution. . . .

Link-Up Example

Another possible use is a link-up service between the state and local Extension Services, home computer, and supermarket. The information seeker dials the Extension office and requests the week's menus at one of three cost levels. The menus are fed into the home computer along with a grocery list. Modification in the menus to fit the family's food preferences and resulting changes to the shopping list are then made.

After changes, the homemaker transmits the information to the Extension computer for confirmation that the menus still meet desirable nutritional standards. When okay, the home computer transmits the grocery order directly to the computer in the supermarket. The supermarket returns a confirmation with a list of prices and total. The shopper then can delete any items that are out of line in price and make substitutions.

The home computer is programmed to maintain a food and household supply inventory and alert the homemaker to supplies requiring refilling. When the shopping order is complete and correct, the shopper instructs the supermarket to fill the order and indicates the time the order will be picked up. Payment is a direct electronic transfer between the accounts of the shopper and the supermarket.

**Extension's
Challenge**

Computers are already important to our information-based society. Many small businesses are currently employing minicomputers to improve their decision making. As the price of computers declines, computers will become as common in the home as the television is today.

The remaining question is: Will Extension accept the challenge to fully use this technology to increase the decisions made on the farm and in the home? The answer lies in how well we work to create innovative programs and inspire clientele to learn to operate and exploit the decision-making potential of their computers.