Computers: What Can They Do For Farming?

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LANCASTER (Lancaster Co.) — Before buying a computer for your farm operation, the panelists had this advice: Consult those in the know.

"I suggest you deal with someone that understands ag software. You should try and purchase a turnkey system, which includes the hardware and software in the package," said Nevin Dourte, from Jacob H. Ruhl, Inc. insurance company. Dourte spoke on a panel, "Lessons I Have Learned," during the Agriculture Computing Conference last week at the Farm and Home Center.

Dourte was one of three panelists who agreed that, while it may be difficult at times finding the exact computer software for the right farm application, analyzing your needs, consulting the specialists, and becoming more knowledgeable about software products are keys to finding the right computer for the right application.

About seven computer exhibitors from the area were on hand to answer questions and display the latest computer and hardware products for the potential farm user at the conference, conducted by the Penn State extension. Farm computer experts spoke about new developments in hardware, environmental monitoring, expert systems, and telecommunications — and how they are used on the farm.

Nothing for sure

"Nothing is for sure anymore," said Dourte. "Software companies you look at may look totally solid now, but 6 or 12 months down the line they may not be around. If somebody goes out of business, there is a chance somebody may but the company and keep it going. But you can't be sure."

Dourte and the other panelists agreed that knowing the right specialists and getting an accountant's professional help before purchasing a computer are important.

"I rely on people specializing in certain areas," said Roger Garber, who operates a Mt. Joy farm with his father and brother. Together they farm about 1,000 acres and raise poultry, livestock, and crops. He uses an IBM-compatible computer.

Garber said, "There are certain people specialized in a certain area that you find, people who know a certain area — and you tie into them for their knowledge."

Value of computers

Garber's "school of hard knocks" experience has taught him the value of using computers on his farm. Certain accounting software elements, such as references, enterprising, check writing, and other accounting procedures are important to him.

"My advice is to sit down with your accountant and determine what you need before you buy a computer," Garber said.

Ed Zug, a Peach Bottom dairy farmer, purchased his Apple IIe in 1983. He manages 50 Holsteins on his 150 acres of cropland, keeps careful crop and profit and loss statements on a monthly basis, and tax records on his computer.

After purchasing his computer, Zug took a class in using the computer, and gives his advice for the potential computer buyer: "Find what you want and try to find the software that allows you to do that. And come to meetings like this to find out about computer software and hardware for farming."

Look for software

But the first thing to do is look first for the software that will work best for you, and then select the hardware accordingly, according to Zug.

Dourte, who purchased a "true blue" IBM, agrees. "The best and easiest way is to find a program that will meet your needs on the farm and operate it. Jump right in, but get what you need up front," he said.

But Dourte cautions that if you learn the program too fast, it may not be the right one for you. And custom-written software "is not the way to go — it's more expensive than a canned program."

You must examine whether the program, in the end, will save you time. The computer may not necessarily make you more money, but the "increased accuracy and the detail out" is what brings most farmers who use computers "back week after week for more," Dourte said.

Gospel of computing

"Time is money," said Garber. "But the gospel of computing is to back up your hard drive." If you don't back up the hard drive (which stores most of the software and data on a computer), "you could lose data," he said.

But the panelists who spend time learning on a certain machine purchased the same machine because it was what they were "used to." All said they would

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"Computer programs are becoming more user-friendly than 4 or 8 years ago," said Pat Richie, multi-county ag engineer, at the Ag Computing Conference.

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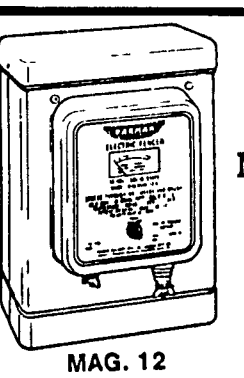

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