

Computers can only enhance catalog buying

Look in the catalog.

That once was an all-purpose phrase for families in remote farm communities who relied on mail order buying for everything from appliances to zippers.

Today, catalogs still arrive in the mail, but that's about where the similarity with the good old days ends. Now, sales are transacted by telephone and computer. And while basic work clothes and household items are still catalog mainstays, customers can also find on those colorful, glossy pages silk dresses and limited edition collectors' items.

Every major department store is now in the catalog business. Penney's got into the act in 1965, buying out a longtime catalog sales company.

Because Penney's is a relative newcomer, it has a three-year old central operation in Manchester, N.H., which is quite up-to-date. The chain has quickly latched on to new technology.

At Sears, where catalog sales are as old as the 99-year-old company, the electronic age is speeding up the ordering process because sales are recorded on computer terminals.

Perhaps 10 years from now, catalog customers will view the desired item on their own computer screen and punch in their own bank account or charge account number, doing both the ordering and paying right in the home.

The centralized system will keep exact figures on stock. As an item sold, the

computerized inventory is automatically reduced. When the next clerk fields a call, the new numbers are at her fingertips.

If an item is out of stock or being reordered, the customer can find out right away and decide whether to choose another color, wait for the next shipment from the factory or buy elsewhere.

These days, 30-50 percent of all U.S. households do at least some buying in response to catalog offers, according to Robin Patrick, press relations assistant with the industry's Direct Marketing Association.

Dollar figures for consumers catalog

sales show a \$2 billion growth from 1982 to 1983 and a whopping \$14 billion growth between 1979 and 1983.

Among the legions of buyers adding to those sales figures are the growing numbers of working women who prefer to browse through catalogs and shop at home.

To speed up the notification process, Sears has automated its phone notification and the news that "your order is in" is now relayed by a voice-activated recorded message machine which dials automatically.

It will call the customers' home three

times during the day. If there is no response, a postcard is then sent. This means Sears is now able to notify customers the same day their merchandise arrives.

Big chains are concerned about keeping a personal touch to their service, especially when accepting the returns that are a fact of life in catalog sales.

Will catalog sales, computer terminals and automatic phone messages ever replace the traditional store?

No. Customers will still want to browse, touch and buy items on the spur of the moment.

Let's take a peek at a future job bulletin

Four out of five of the fastest-growing occupations listed by the U.S. Department of Labor are in the computer field, but a future job bulletin board might contain a few surprises.

While telephone operators may disappear as automated equipment performs their jobs, other telecommunications positions are opening faster than they can be filled. "We expect a 300 percent increase in employees by 2000," says Dr. Bennett Berman of MCI Telecommunications.

Many of those jobs will be in areas just now blooming: cellular radio (a type of mobile telephone), electronic mail, and computer libraries.

Other items on a 21st century job list, according to a National Geographic survey of futurists, might include:

— Biomedical engineer needed to construct bionic arms, legs, hands, and feet.

— Laser inspection technician wanted to install and maintain laser devices at sites varying from supermarket checkout counters to factories.

— Hazardous waste technician desired. Will collect, monitor, transport and dispose of hazardous materials.

— Paramedic capable of performing emergency procedures on accident victims needed. Doctors will supervise via hospital monitors.

The survey also points out that more women and older people will work in the next century. More people will work at home and telecommute to the office by computer.

And, whatever we do, it says, "We'll probably do less of it. In the last hundred years, we cut our number of working hours in half," said one futurist. "I think we'll do that again in half the time."

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