HORIZON HOLIDAYS LAUNCH THEIR VIEWDATA REAL-TIME 'INFORMATION SERVICE'

Horizon Holidays launched last June what they consider to be a rather unique 'availability information service' using Rediffusion Viewdata Plus. Nine travel agents from the Birmingham area and one located in the North of England, were invited to participate in the trials and to date the scheme has worked extremely well.

Horizon was started in 1965 by Bruce Tanner, the present chairman. He felt that there was a need for a Midlands-based tour operator to provide quality holidays and, in the first year, Horizon carried 5000 passengers compared to 400,000 this year. In March 1980 Horizon established Orion Airways and they now have a fleet of six Boeing 737s operating out of Birmingham, East Midlands, Luton and Manchester, and this year they are flying for the first time out of Gatwick.

Holidays are exclusively to European and North African resorts with 50% of the traffic going to Spain. For the skiing enthusiast Horizon have a full winter sports programme and this winter they will be entering the North American market, but only in a modest way.

"Since 1972 the company has been aware that to grow it must concentrate on providing an accurate and efficient service to travel agents as 90% or more of our business emanates from this source. We must ensure, therefore, that the service we give is 'second to none'," said Trevor Haddleton, management services director.

Horizon believes in investing in modern technology to keep one step ahead of their competitors. As a result they have invested heavily in data processing and, a few years ago, they offered a microfilm information service to their agents. This was soon overtaken by Prestel*. "So we became part of the Prestel service when it initially began," said Haddleton. "Our aim was to provide a first-class 'availability service' and we tried very hard to ensure that it was reliable and up-to-date. Unfortunately some of our competitors using the Prestel facility failed to achieve the same standards so the service lost some of its reputation. When agents accessed the relevant pages, of some competitors, they were never absolutely sure that the information shown was in fact correct."

When Rediffusion Computers released their 'Office System for the Eighties' with Viewdata Plus last year it seemed the most natural transition for Horizon to move into this high technology arena. The company installed a pilot viewdata system in February 1981 and during the trial period the results proved most satisfactory. On the strength of this Horizon launched their information viewdata service giving access,

And Jones' colleague Peter Bromley says, "The length of time from concept to end result is very short. And the system is easy to program for anybody with only a small amount of computing experience. We've trained four of the users here to write programs relating to their own problems." As well as the greater satisfaction and improved morale that comes from having the system under the user's control, the key-to-disk system has provided a greatly improved response to queries. For example, the MRP system referred to earlier has had its turnround time reduced from a minimum of 10 days to less than a day. Another example is provided by the planning processes system.

the computer department. In that way both we and they can be confident that our request is reasonable and feasible."

The moral of this interesting case history is threefold. Don't be too hidebound by prevailing ideas — ease of use and control by the user don't necessarily require either an ever more complex mainframe, or a host of micros. Don't pay too much attention to marketing labels — just because a system is called a data entry machine doesn't mean it can't perform a different function equally well. And don't think there's no scope for ingenuity in computing today. The early shirtsleeved programmer fixing a bug with a soldering iron may have disappeared forever, but the spirit
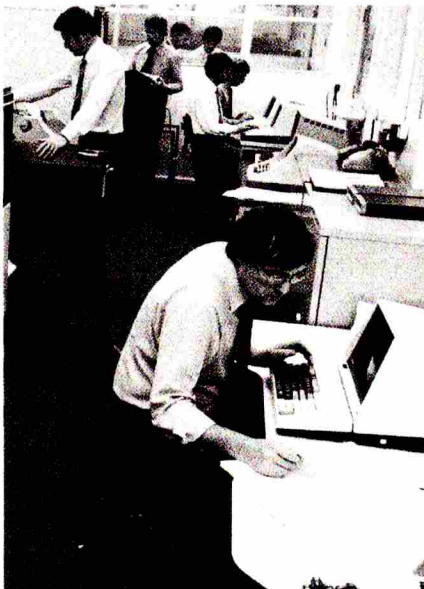
Horizon Holidays, voted Tour Operator of the Year by the travel trade in 1981 and consistent leader of consumer surveys conducted by magazines such as 'Holiday Which', has developed its VISTA (Videotex Information System for Travel Agents' — **Information Management August 1981**) into an on-line booking system. In this follow-up report, **Information Management** talks to Trevor Haddleton, a board director of the Horizon group and its holidays and retail companies. Haddleton, has been the driving force behind all Horizon's computerisation programme and is also chairman of the Holiday Systems Group, a body set up by 40 companies in the travel business to develop standards. One result of the group's efforts has been the publication of a report containing standard videotex frames for agents' data entry procedures. Standard formats for printing and ticketing, the problems of electronic funds transfer and linking to microcomputers are topics that are currently exercising the group's attention.

Twenty-five Rediffusion Mark III VDUs are installed in the production planning department at British Aerospace — Dynamics Group, Bristol.

There are 50,000 planning processes, each relating to a different type of weapons system manufactured by the division. Previously, it took a day to retrieve one planning process record from the mainframe at Stevenage, update it with new information as required and return it. Now the whole procedure takes less than an hour.
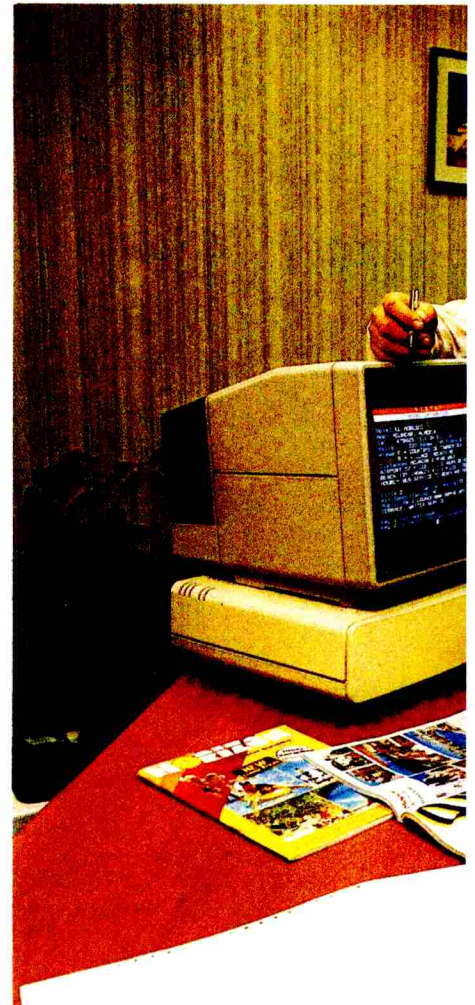
In another application, a file of some 80,000 records previously held on the mainframe is now stored on the key-to-disk system itself. The production control department previously received a big printout of this file each week and had to search through it each time they wanted any information from it — a situation that arises 40 to 50 times a week. Now a simple request to the system operator is all that is required — the precise answer comes back in 10 minutes. The need for the printout has been done away with completely.

The key-to-disk system has also proved useful as a testbed for developing mainframe systems. As Jones says, "Even with our experience of computing we can't define our requirements right first time. With the Rediffusion system we can develop our ideas on the screen and test them out before we approach

which animated him and drove computing to its present level of development is still producing valuable dividends in the new microchip world.

Picture shows the production systems computer room at British Aerospace — Dynamics Group, Bristol, which houses two new Rediffusion R2830 Telecentre central processors.

A typical page of hotel information is displayed on the Rediffusion Teleputer/3 which travel agents can access by using VISTA (Horizon's Videotex Information System for Travel Agents).

VIDEOTEX

HORIZON DOES IT BETTER AND OFFERS ON-LINE BOOKING

"For years travel agents have been wanting to access the computer-based reservations systems of airlines and tour operators. It could have been done, but it would have required a plethora of terminals at prohibitive cost. Then along came Prestel followed by private videotex systems. The technology was seen as a breakthrough and was an immediate hit with the travel trade."

Trevor Haddleton, director of management services for Horizon Holidays sees videotex as a natural extension of the way travel agents traditionally have done business. "The bulk of travel agency business has always been done over the 'phone: videotex is a substitute for telephone conversation," he said. He could have added that it is also a telephone substitute that is almost never engaged and has visual advantages for both agent and client.

Responding to the pressure in the market, Horizon, with the launch of its major Summer 1984 holiday programme, went one step further with its VISTA videotex information service and introduced direct on-line booking. From September 12, 3100 travel agents have been able to book holidays from the Horizon Summer, Winter Sunshine, Golf, Winter Sports and Faresaver programmes straight off the videotex screen.

Behind it all is a £½ million investment in additional computer systems, a communications network and several months of intensive planning and development.

"When we went into videotex we saw it as primarily an information disseminator. We'd solved all the problems associated with computer-based reservations and had what we thought was the best bookings system in the country. So we used videotex as a means to get information on holiday availability, hotels and climate and to display flight details and agent's bookings and options due to lapse. Now we see that it can also be used to bring business directly into the company," commented Haddleton.

The videotex bookings system is running alongside Horizon's 'conventional' on-line bookings system, which uses 180 visual displays at their head office in Birmingham. It's a moot point as to just how much business will be generated through videotex — the computer system has been built to handle 100 per cent, though the current estimate is nearer half initially, and is likely to stabilise at about 80 per cent of total bookings, Haddleton estimates. On any count, that's substantial since Horizon Holidays' turnover was £104 million from 420,000 holidays sold in 1982.

For the agent, the videotex bookings system has brought a few changes to the way he or she operates in relation to Horizon — for example, the agent, who is responsible for collecting the cash once a booking is confirmed on videotex, retains the booking form. Horizon has also introduced a 24-hour option period in place of the five-day option it previously held on holidays, the objective being to have more holidays on sale at any one time.

For the most part, however, the agents, now thoroughly versed in videotex, have taken the new system in their stride. "To them it's a gentle expansion of a familiar system, rather than a dramatic change in direction; this is how we want it to be," Haddleton said.

The new system is based on four Rediffusion R2830 Telecentres, three of which were delivered through the summer to join the original machine installed to handle the VISTA information system. The four R2830s are all interlinked as a single system and are supporting 120 concurrent videotex ports, giving IBM 3270 'passthrough' access to the central reservations system based on two BASF 7/65 IBM-compatible mainframes — one a production and the other a development machine. The Rediffusion equipment had proved to be extremely easy to program — in Haddleton's view, much easier than machines of IBM architecture — while the way the system is configured did, in fact, offer exceptional back-up capability which extended into the network.

Picture shows Trevor Haddleton — management services director who was responsible for launching the system in 1981.

The Orion Aircraft

Case supplied the communication network and had close cooperation from Rediffusion in the development of the system and the data network so that the whole system can stay operational in the event of a failure in any element. "And if the whole lot goes down, they can still use the existing bookings system," said Haddleton, tongue in cheek.

The network takes advantage of the new British Telecom 'Kilostream' service that takes VDU and videotex traffic down the same lines into Horizon's computer centre and unscrambles it on arrival. Local call access is available to the network from 20 groups of 'phone numbers located within a triangle running from Glasgow in the north to Cardiff and Brighton at its base.

Previously most agents wanting to access VISTA had to ring a long-distance number, so the agent stands to benefit from the network even if he decides only to use the information system rather than the new booking system.
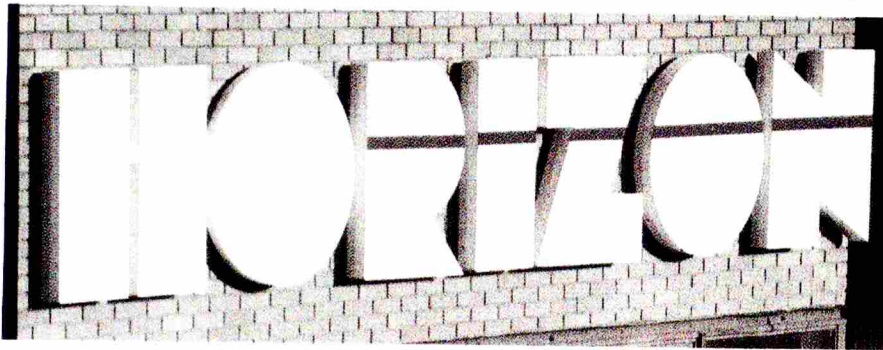
For Horizon, which had for some years provided local speech line access to its central system at a cost of £150,000 a year, the data network

is also providing significant cost savings.

For the time being Horizon's 'Action Unit', the group that handles last-minute bookings (those in the period within 28 days of a departure date), is continuing to operate as before.

Horizon, like other operators, works on the concept of 'bank staff', a body of trained workers available on a part-time basis to supplement a cadre of experienced reservation permanent staff at seasonal peaks; VISTA will have the effect of reducing Horizon's calls on this reserve workforce.

The seasonal nature of the package holiday business is a factor that a booking system operated remotely by travel agent, as third parties, can take in its stride. It means that Horizon no longer has to staff up to handle the peak loads which are becoming more, rather than less of a problem to the industry.

"At one time a tour operator could expect to sell up to 60 per cent of his inventory before the end of January. Of late, it's more like 30 per cent," said

Haddleton. The tendency to late booking has been accentuated during the recession when people have been able to take advantage of taking their pick from a flat market. It won't be long before things pick up again and people find that they're disappointed when they leave things to the last minute. Only then, in Haddleton's view, will there be any chance of a return to the early booking market that operators prefer.

This makes it all the more critical for operators to grab business while it's there; speed and ease of booking via VISTA enable Horizon to do this.

The saving grace for the tour operators in general and Horizon in particular, is that the overall level of business has held up well. From a standing start in 1965, Horizon has developed from its Midlands base into the third largest national operator with its own fleet of aircraft, Orion Airways, and flying from Gatwick, Bristol, Cardiff, Luton, Birmingham, East Midlands, Manchester, Leeds-Bradford, Newcastle, Glasgow and Edinburgh. And there's plenty of growth potential, in Haddleton's view.

"Only around ten per cent of the British public take overseas holidays," he pointed out. "The price of fuel," he added, "appeared to have stabilised and European currencies have become cheaper in recent history." This means the overseas package tour still represents 'even better value for money'.

Haddleton remembers the old days when the tour companies sold holidays off enormous wall charts. The old days, in this case, were in 1972 when he joined Horizon at the time the company was due to go public. It was a classic case of a management consultant with a solid background in data processing, acquired after nearly ten years with IBM, being sent into a company on an assignment and then being offered the chance by the client of putting his recommendations into practice.

Ten years and several computer systems later, Horizon is totally dependent on its computer systems. Videotex is simply the latest computer-based technology that Horizon is employing as a competitive tool to sustain growth and to live up to its slogan, 'Nobody does it better'.
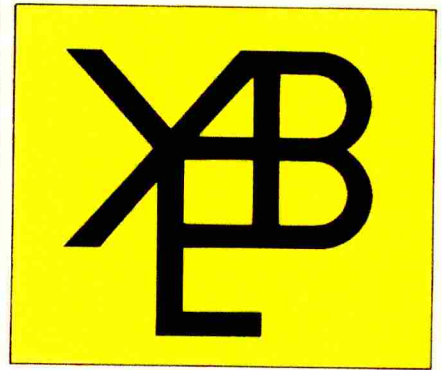
by
Nicholas Enticknap

Life in the DP department is traditionally very busy. Just fulfilling the daily production schedule and keeping up with the planned development programme is a demanding task. When the time comes to replace some aged equipment with more modern kit, the pressure is increased.

Time has to be found to define the requirements of the new system, and then to evaluate a number of alternative possibilities. Once that's been done, the new hardware has to be installed without disrupting in any way the service to users. It's a time of intense activity with scope for snarl-ups and mistakes.

The Yorkshire Electricity Board (YEB) has recently been through this process with its batch data entry equipment. To an uninformed observer, replacing data entry equipment might seem to be a less critical task than replacing a mainframe, but in many ways it is just as demanding. As Terry Lavelle, principal executive officer with YEB, says. "If we lose an hour's punching time, that's 45 person hours data entry, and it's quite impossible to pull that back quickly."

The board takes pride in the efficiency of its billing system and works to a very tight timetable.

And unless it's pulled back extremely quickly, the YEB's very tight work schedule would be disrupted and cashflow could be affected.

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To describe the schedule, let's take a Monday as the starting point. The meter readers do their prescribed rounds taking readings. They have a lot of work to do: the YEB has 1.8 million customers spread throughout an area of over 4000 square miles. Some 30,000 meters have to be read each day.

HORIZON

initially, to ten agents. The service has been christened VISTA, a mnemonic for 'Viewdata Information System for Travel Agents'. Haddleton is confident that this service will grow rapidly but Horizon have purposely kept it on a small scale to start with as it is far easier to sort out any teething troubles with a few users than with a lot.

The participating agents were invited to the company's headquarters for the launch so that this new service could be explained to them. Horizon felt that the 'availability information service' was the right system to provide at this stage. They wanted feedback from the agents to see how they felt on the availability of information that was initially being offered and how this could

be further improved. Haddleton was gratified to receive a list of nine features that the agents wished to see incorporated and they are now working on the second phase so that these facilities will be available within a matter of weeks.

But why an 'availability information service' instead of introducing a reservation service? The service is in fact one of availability of holidays. The 'availability information service' is based on a National Semiconductor mainframe which is built to the same architecture as an IBM computer and the Rediffusion R1800/30 minicomputer provides a 'Gateway' to the database which is maintained in real-time mode. So when agents access Horizon's information they can be

sure that the information they are receiving is completely up-to-date, taking into account transactions entered even within the last few seconds.

Imagine that you are a tour operator. The problem is that when a brochure is launched there are only a limited number of holidays to a specific hotel on a specific day. And when the brochure has been out for only a very short time a large proportion of those holidays, certainly the most popular ones, would soon be 'sold out'. It is therefore a fact of life that a majority of the holidays that are sold are not precisely what the client initially selects. They may need to choose an alternative hotel or a flight on a different day of the week. Horizon agents must

know, therefore, what is immediately available. The agent wants to reduce his telephone conversations to a minimum — long-distance calls cost money, not only in 'phone charges but in the time his staff take over a transaction. It is imperative that VISTA gives the agent as much information as possible. It shows him what holidays are available before he eventually picks up the 'phone to make a reservation. This goal Horizon has achieved.

Another important feature planned for the next phase is that the agent will be able to access any booking previously made with the company to enquire on its status. Has the invoice been prepared? Have the tickets been sent? Agents often have clients coming into their office to ask about their booking, perhaps wanting to check, for instance, if they have booked car hire. Normally the agent would telephone Horizon's operations department and make the enquiry they, in turn, would have to ask the computer. This used to be a time consuming task — but with the new facility agents will merely tap some numbers into their viewdata TV set and the answer will appear on their screens within seconds. Not only will it be quick but impressive as far as the client is concerned. The client will truly feel that here is a 'switched on' agent who can recall this information within seconds from the Horizon computer even for a booking that was made some nine months ago!

Horizon promotes brand loyalty and by offering this quick, accurate and efficient service the company believes it is unlikely that clients would wish to change their tour operator.

Haddleton sees VISTA expanding but only on a local and medium distance radius at the moment. "We have over 2000 agents who actually sell our holidays so any of them will be able to access our system in the future. But one of the restrictions of fast growth is the method of communications. Long-distance viewdata communications over the telephone lines are an expensive overhead. We are all waiting for the day when British Telecom will release the packet switching service when data calls will be so much cheaper," said Haddleton. "But until this happens we would not expect to see fast expansion."

In fact Horizon will concentrate on a radius of 30 miles or so until they get the packet switching service. In the West Midlands area there are approximately 500 agents who will soon have the opportunity to access the Horizon system.

Their system is unique — Horizon has given great thought to the type of information they need and equally the company has taken into consideration the needs of their agents. The burning question was — What information would you like to receive from the tour operator which you find difficulty in obtaining? Reply — Availability of holidays plus up-to-date and accurate availability information concerning bookings already made and the facility to be able to recall information on a client's booking. Horizon think that they have satisfied their agents' demands and in this respect they believe that the system is, indeed, unique and ahead of the field.

Haddleton and his co-directors feel that they cannot yet improve on their telephone-based reservation service and until that happens see no point in introducing new technology in that area just for the sake of it.

In conclusion, Horizon have been well pleased with the performance of the Rediffusion hardware and software. Haddleton firmly believes that programming in the 1980s should be easy and fast. "And certainly the Rediffusion software bears that out," he said. "Mainframe manufacturers make it difficult for one to program their computers. But our programmers have been able to program the job much more quickly on the Rediffusion minicomputer."

*Prestel is a British Telecom trademark.