



Business News

Videotex keeps ICI sales reps in touch

ICI, Britain's biggest public company and operating with one of the largest sales forces in the country, believes it has solved the age-old problem of communicating with salesmen. Its answer, the result of a year's trial carried out within the fertilizer sales operation of its Agricultural Division, is to put videotex TVs into reps' homes. The experiment, the first large-scale use of videotex in this way, has proved so successful that it is being extended across the country.

It's one truism to say that nothing much happens in commerce and industry until someone sells something; it's another that nothing much, by and large, is sold until a salesman gets in front of a customer.

Home-based salesmen

The typical salesman is, in the final resort, on his own. He — or she — has a car, covers a wide area and, as often as not, works from home.

That's certainly the case with the 120 sales representatives who, literally, cover the country for ICI's Agricultural Division selling nitrogen-based fertilizers. With only five regional offices

— York, Peterborough, Guildford, Bristol and Shrewsbury — visits to the office are

few and far between. The ICI fertilizer salesmen are very much home-based as a condition of the job.

They are also spread fairly evenly across the country, with roughly three salesmen per county, and the sales regions cover enormous areas. The Eastern region, based in Peterborough, for example, covers from the Thames to the Humber, with the M1 as the dividing line between East and West. And the Northern region, with York as its pivot, goes from the Scottish border to the Humber and from Cumberland down to the Mersey.

All this creates a man-sized

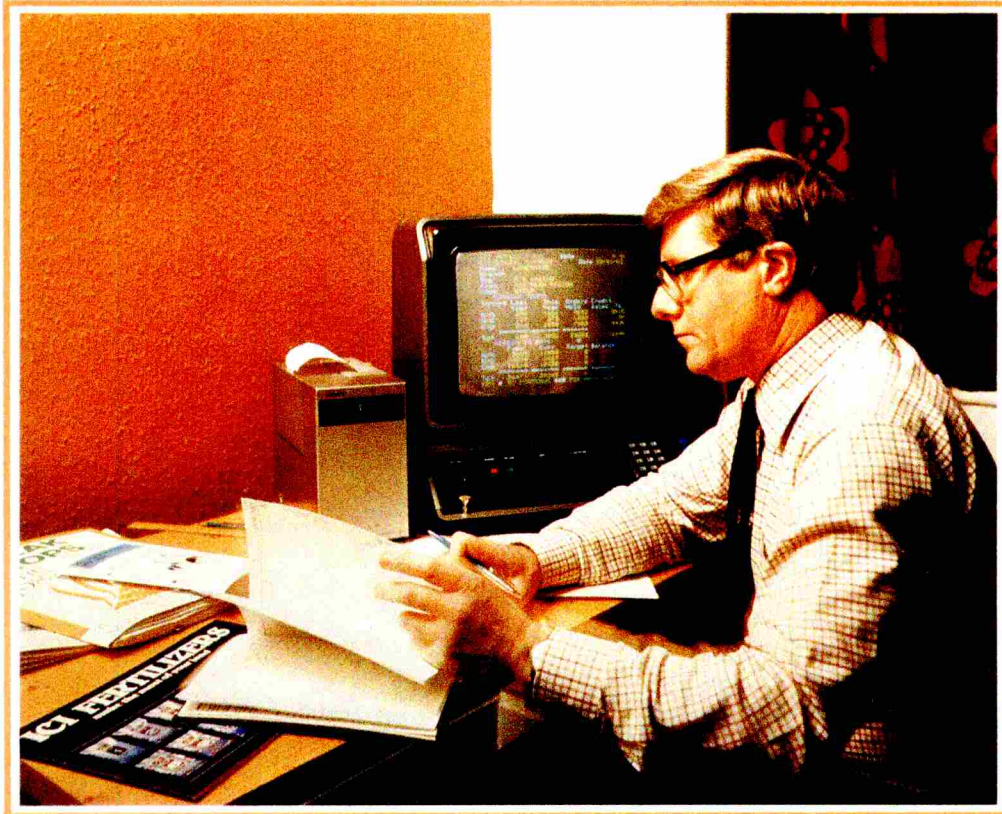
communications problem which, until about a year ago, was addressed only by the spoken and written word: the 'phone and the postal services. Then along came Prestel and ICI began to get interested in the potential of the television screen as a cost-effective communications device.

Private system for reps

At first, the thought was that videotex could be used to communicate with farmers, but then attention was focussed on the more pressing and more manageable problem of communication with the Agricultural Division sales force. Prestel, it was decided, was not the answer, largely because of the privileged and confidential nature of the sales information. The decision, therefore, was taken to develop a private system and to run a trial videotex system for representatives in the Northern region.

"We were looking first and foremost at ways to give the sales force access to commercial information that was all available inside our IBM computer system," said Stan Lawrence, communications manager with the fertilizer sales department. "Redifusion had the Prestel look-alike software to do





Stan Lawrence — communications manager, ICI Agricultural Division, fertilizer sales department, is pictured at home using Rediffusion's private videotex system.

that, so we went with the company."

Lawrence, himself a fertilizer salesman for six years working from home in South Lincolnshire before he was brought into the Agricultural Division's headquarters in Billingham specifically to manage the user end of the trial, knew what it was like to have to wait to the middle of the month following a request for a computer print-out, or to short-cut the process by ringing a clerk at regional office to persuade them to pull off some information from the sales order system. He, therefore, knew what was needed and could act as the link between the field sales force and the computer department.

Up-to-date information

"The IBM system collects all the statistics for all our customers. We had to find a way to get this information to the sales reps without the use of VDUs, which would have been prohibitively expensive and without lots of print-outs," said Lawrence. The trial, run under the auspices of the ICI Agricultural Division's management services department, was to prove that videotex, which looked promising, was that way.

Other uses perceived for videotex and, therefore, set as objectives for the

trial were first, the provision of 'current awareness information' drawn from ICI's Fertilizer Marketing Intelligence Review (FMIR), a printed publication dealing with industry developments, and, second, 'messaging' between the salesmen and sales management and also between individual salesmen.

There is inevitably a delay in getting printed information to the sales force. By putting the technical information up onto videotex, salesmen could be brought up-to-date with, say, information on winter wheat growing as soon as it became available from the research station. "It's part of the salesman's job to be aware of the industry in which he's involved," commented Lawrence. "It means he can talk intelligently to the farmer and the agents with whom he's dealing."

Messaging

Messages on the TV screen were also seen as a useful device for keeping in touch, particularly since the salesman, if he's doing his job, is on the road and

difficult to reach by 'phone. "If you're a sales manager and you want to reach, perhaps, 30 reps in a hurry, the 'phone is not necessarily the most efficient instrument," said Lawrence. "How much easier to put a message out on the system which the reps see as soon as they get home."

Messaging, which at first was a low priority in the minds of the people managing the videotex trial, was one of the early successes of the experiment, Lawrence confided. "It soon became apparent that it was more important than we thought, particularly from the regional office out to the field."

Field trial

The field trial in Northern region started in January last year. Each of the 30 salesmen in the region had a videotex TV installed in his home, as did the region's three managers. Altogether, then, 47 people were directly involved. Managers in other regions and in the head office at Billingham had access to terminals to keep abreast of the trials. Some had the telly in the lounge, others in the kitchen or breakfast room, and there were even some in the bedroom and the shed at the bottom of the garden.

The telly went wherever the rep had