AUTOMOTIVE
TALBOT LAUNCH THEIR INFORMATION SERVICE 'VITAL'

Charles Greenland is the management information services director of the Talbot Motor Company and a champion of videotex technology. The potential for intelligent videotex terminals is immense and he sees the commercial world as being at the beginning of a decade where, he says, "we will be exploring how to use these terminals to improve the distribution of information and improve the interaction between the consumer, distributor and supplier of goods".

Videotex technology has given companies the opportunity to install terminals where they are really needed. Talbot have always wanted terminals in their 650 dealerships, but neither party has been able to afford the capital expenditure until the advent of videotex technology. Today it has become a real possibility.

Talbot, as many of you will remember, was formerly the Rootes Group which was bought by Chrysler USA in the late sixties. Subsequently the company was sold to Automobile Peugeot and underwent a change of name. Talbot is now part of Peugeot SA of Paris, who also own Citroen and a variety of other companies and are the largest European automotive group with a total of approximately two million vehicles being manufactured in 1980/81. With Peugeot/Talbot progressively merging their dealerships throughout Europe, the potential for a group videotex European network is enormous.

The experience in the UK automotive industry has been that the distributors have always wanted their dealers to have terminals, but the most advanced terminals in use prior to viewdata were voice response keypad systems, which are used by Peugeot/Talbot dealers for entering vehicle-off-the-road emergency orders for spare parts, and financial transactions.

"One must first understand human beings and how they interact," said Greenland. "The eyeball is a very much more powerful tool than the ear. If people see something they will believe it far more readily than if they hear it. With the spoken word they are not quite sure whether what is being said is true or not."

During mid-1980, Talbot began to explore possible videotex applications, as did other automotive groups, and found that the marriage of low cost consumer electronics with computer technology and a standard protocol would give the dealers accurate, up-to-date and relevant information that the company already had stored in its database and which had only previously been available on weekly computer printouts.

"The reason we have chosen to provide an information service first rather than to seek to impose upon them a data capture system is that we wish to build up a commitment to use this technology, to encourage them to rent the terminals then, at a later stage, we will 'piggy' back the collection of data through these systems," continued Greenland.

On November 10, 1981, 'VITAL' (VIewdata from TALbot), using a Rediffusion R1800/30 compact office system was launched. This is the automotive world's first information service linked directly to the manufacturer's database and 30 selected Talbot and Peugeot dealers throughout the UK are participating in the pilot scheme. There are two levels of security, every dealer has a registered TV identity number together with an optional personal password which gains the dealer access to the system.

The VITAL service has been developed on the R1800/30. The configuration is: 96KB processor, 800/1600 dual density tape deck, 20MB disk, 1 × 480 Mk III terminal with full typewriter keyboard, eight communication ports for TV monitor access. It is capable of holding up to 10,500 pages of text.

TV monitors to standard British Telecom PRESTEL specification are attached via the
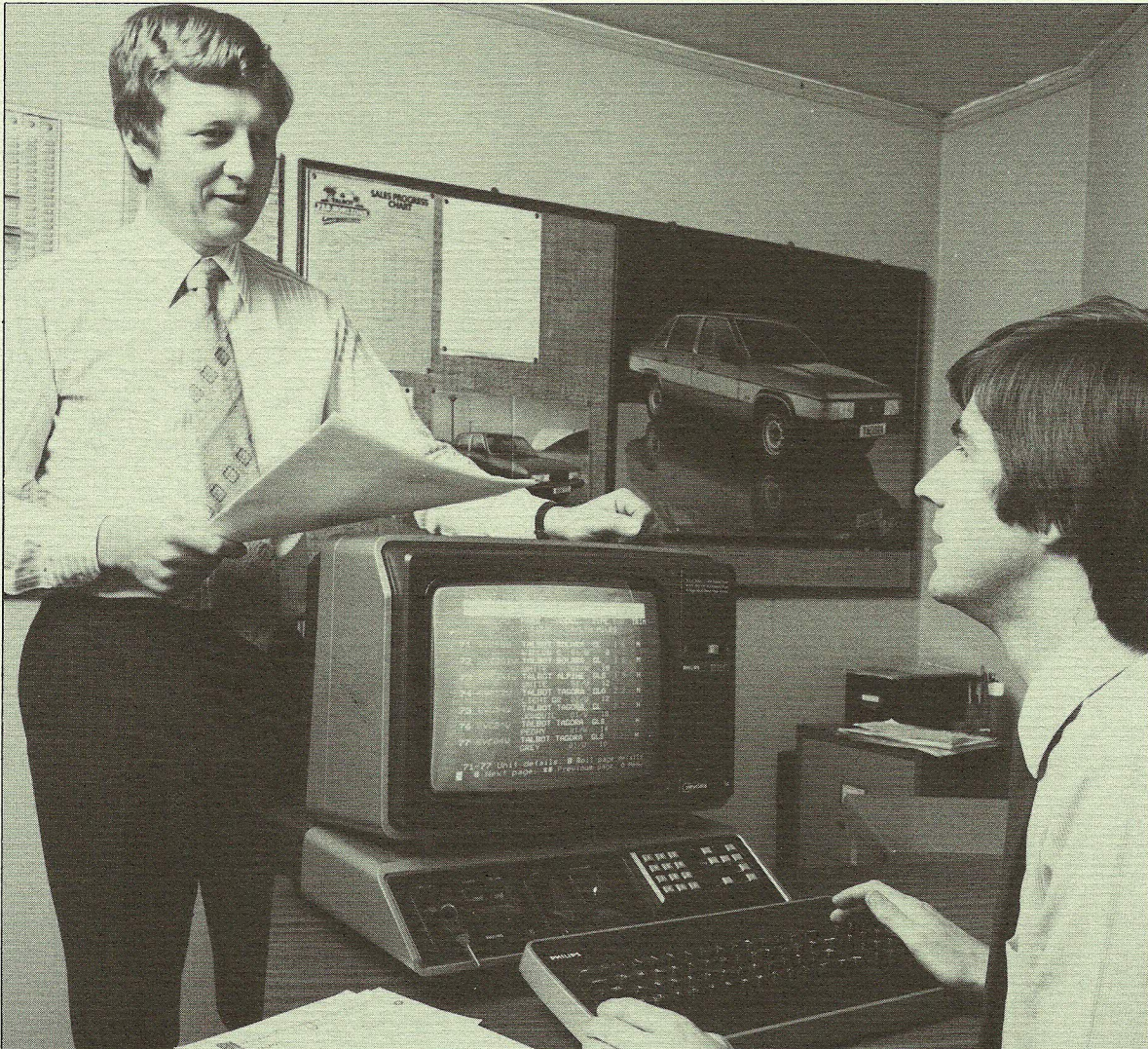
DEALER NETWORK . . . Talbot Motor Company, part of the Peugeot automotive group has turned to videotex to strengthen the communications channel that it has with its UK dealer network.
For some time the firm has been looking for a way to connect its 650 dealers to its computer systems, but prior to the advent of videotex the capital cost has proved prohibitive. Now its VITAL (VIewdata for TALbot) service links dealers to the manufacturer's central computer system via a Rediffusion computer for data on national stock availability of both new cars and used cars in dealer premises and the status of individual orders, as well as marketing and field service information. There is also an electronic facility to allow registered users of the system to communicate with each other and with the company.

GPO network and through CODEX supplied modems — types UDS V23 1200/75 fitted with Cole R2070 auto answer units.

The Rediffusion R1800/30 is linked to a mainframe Amdahl 470 V/6-11 computer in the data centre at Coventry via Tech-Nel DM-500 line drivers working at 9600bps.

The complete development under the leadership of Neil Campbell (sales and services systems manager) — took five months from project specification through system design, development, equipment installation and pilot implementation.

The announced VITAL services are:

VITAL — Locate-a-new car
VITAL — Locate-a-used car
VITAL — Order status
VITAL — Field services
VITAL — Marketing
VITAL — Mailbox

Greenland is confident that this electronic communication channel between the dealer and the company will strengthen Talbot's commercial relationship with them and ensure that they will receive accurate and up-to-date information, so essential to a progressive dealer network.

But let us now look a little more closely at the 'VITAL' services.

VITAL — LOCATE-A-NEW CAR

Perhaps the most important application of all, because Talbot decided from the very beginning to use videotex terminals, the Rediffusion minicomputer and link them directly into their Amdahl mainframe, rather than load the information from the Amdahl to the Rediffusion minicomputer. One of the attractions of using a Rediffusion videotex system was the communication capability and 3270 passthrough package.

The vehicle file is updated each night with details of despatches, transfers and registrations and provides the dealers with an accurate position of stock availability.

The facility allows dealers to define the exact model, engine, gearbox, they are looking for and then allows them to specify paint colour, and an optional fitment. The method of specification can be either by accessing tables of models with their colours and options or by entering relevant order codes. Once the required vehicle's specification has been defined, the computer will advise the dealer of the availability by three geographic searches giving availability in the dealer's area, in adjoining areas and nationally. Details of vehicles will

then be displayed showing the dealer codes of the dealers holding the vehicles and the inquiring dealer will then have the option of accessing the dealer file for full particulars of the dealer's name, address, telephone number and contact salesman.

As from January 1982, the Peugeot and Talbot vehicle systems were integrated thus offering dealers access to all vehicles the group manufacture. This whole routine and dialogue is designed to promote the transfer of vehicles within the network. The point being that cars manufactured by Talbot, ie Samba (Talbot's newly released small car), Horizon, Alpine, Solara, Tagora, together with the full Peugeot range of cars, vans and estate car derivatives, could not possibly be stocked by all dealers. The Locate-a-car routine is therefore designed to match a customer's precise requirements for a consumer durable with the product as quickly as possible. If the product doesn't exist then it has to be built with an order cycle which takes between 20 to 30 days.

VITAL — ORDER STATUS

This facility allows dealers to enquire on Talbot's vehicle order file to determine the current status of individual orders. Talbot have something like 15 different stages (or status) for each order until the vehicle is delivered.

The important point about an order status file is that every distributor, whether they are distributing pharmaceutical products, electrical goods, or whatever, needs status information. Traditionally this is produced on computer tabulations — generating miles of paper which firms send out each week. Greenland is convinced that the cheap videotex TV device is the answer for the entire distribution industry.

VITAL — LOCATE-A-USED CAR

By introducing this application, Talbot have given the dealers the opportunity to use the videotex terminal to enter data on their used car inventory and make them available to the

network. Talbot are interested in supporting the trade so that their dealers remain profitable and the residual values of the cars remain high. This application is rather like the classified ads section of a newspaper. It is a way of promoting their business, of helping the dealers manage their inventories and making sure that this information is available to the franchise. It is a quick, efficient and low cost way of obtaining a used vehicle for a customer at the touch of a button. And certainly an application for use throughout the automotive industry.

VITAL — MARKETING

This is an information system giving outline details of current sales and marketing communications covering product data, general bulletins, advertising campaigns and merchandising literature together with current prices.

VITAL — FIELD SERVICES

A communication system for sales and district managers providing up-to-date information of sales, stocks and orders within their areas.

VITAL — MAILBOX

An electronic mail system which will allow registered users of the system to communicate with each other and the company. The message is stored in VITAL's computer memory until the recipient accesses the mailbox to receive any such messages stored. The recipient then has the option to store or delete messages. The messages stored for a recipient are displayed in date/time order. Recipients of messages are informed if new messages are held for them when they log onto the system and also when leaving the system.

The dealers have responded favourably to the pilot scheme, the bigger dealers typically doing 30 or more 'Locate-a-new car' enquiries a week and claiming to have made additional sales.

Greenland's plan is to install 300 videotex terminals within the next 12 months and the remaining 350 dealers by the middle of 1983. He is committed to the project, but warns that the dealers, as individual business men, have to be convinced of the value of the service.

Greenland thinks that the other major automotive manufacturers will have installed videotex terminals within the next five years. It will become the motor distribution standard for giving access to a range of services from the manufacturers, and the service industry which supports them. Talbot believe that if this application can succeed in the distribution of vehicles, then it is a fair assumption that it will work for the whole distribution industry.

As a second phase, Greenland sees the future being with terminals like Rediffusion's Teleputer — he believes that the development of general purpose terminals with the ability to communicate with different computers, together with the use of tele software to distribute programs from a central agency, will revolutionise the distribution of goods and services.