

Adding to Your Three-Ring Binder

A SERIES ON IMPROVING YOUR HORSE BUSINESS, PART THREE: COMPUTERS

Some thoughts on including computers in your horse business management.

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W YOU'D RATHER USE A COMPUTER TO CHOCK YOUR TRAILER TIRES than replace your 4-inch, three-ring binder full of mare cards. You've run your place for years without a computer. Why should you change now? Besides, you've never touched a keyboard, and you still haven't figured out the fax machine.

Well, the truth is, a computer doesn't have to replace your binder, and it probably shouldn't. But it sure can add a lot to your horse management. Nothing will help you compile, organize and use your farm's data faster or more efficiently, whether it's for printing out a palpation list for the veterinarian, a quick trim list for the farrier or a year-end Stallion Breeder's Report for AQHA. Computers can create advertising layouts, design brochures, compile categorized mailing lists and store years of records and photos, without creating stacks of file folders.

Besides, times are changing. Computers are your ticket to the Internet. More farms are finding it necessary to contact clients via e-mail, and to have a Web site to market both horses and services, especially if they want to reach an international market. Just think of the pedigree and performance records you can download free from AQHA every month. Plus, you can read the *Journal* online.

And the reality is, it's not that difficult to learn how to use computers. Renae Dudley is vice president of marketing for HiMARKS™ (Horseman's Income Management and Record-Keeping System). A longtime American Quarter Horse breeding farm owner/operator prior to starting her own software company, Dudley taught herself how to use computers and incorporate them into her horse management.

"Most people do not computerize these days because of the fear factor," she said. "But software and hardware companies are doing everything they can to make computer use as painless as possible," she argued. In her opinion it's easy; you just have to take the time to do it.

"From my experience," she said, "you have to take the time to follow the directions. It is easier to learn to use them the correct way, rather than spending a lot of time and ending up frustrated learning the hard way through your mistakes."

If you're interested in adding a digital element to your horse management (no matter what its size), the *Journal* dug up some advice to help you through the process.

If you need to know: *Hardware refers to the components that make up the computer itself, the machine that runs the programs you buy. Software refers to the programs that the computer runs; they allow you to do things from typing letters to playing games. Computers often come pre-packaged with certain programs.*

SOFTWARE

Decide what your business needs.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN LOOKING AT HORSE MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE systems, you need to be clear on what your horse business

needs that software to do. It helps to sit down and look at the kind of business you have, the types of tasks you perform and how you go about doing them.

Ask yourself:

- What kind of business do I have? (Private facility, training, breeding, veterinary practice, boarding or a combination.)
- Where do I conduct business? (Out of one office or several, or on the road, etc.)
- How many horses do I need to manage? How do I handle board?
- Do I manage a stallion syndicate?
- What breed reports do I produce, and for how many different breed associations? What should be on those reports?
- What kind of individual records do I keep? (Photos, registration numbers, pedigree, performance, produce, sale results, etc.)
- Do I track horses not on the farm? Do I manage horses in herds, as individuals, or both? Do I track health records (vaccination, deworming, farrier, etc.)
- Do I need to create mailing labels? Be able to sort clients by type? (cutting, reining, board-only, embryo transfer, etc.)

Have these things in mind for two reasons before you start looking at software. First, there is a variety of horse management software available, geared toward everything from small, privately owned farms with 20 or fewer head, to high-volume facilities managing hundreds of horses with hundreds of owners. You need to be able to tell if a program has too much or too little of what you need.

Secondly, horse management programs have been developed out of different "pockets" of our diverse horse industry. A program developed by people with a Thoroughbred background might handle things, such as breeding records, differently from a program developed by people with a ranching background. Never assume a software company understands exactly how you conduct business, even in things as simple as board. You want to look for a program that understands your corner of the horse business, or that is adaptable to it.

Things to consider when you set out to buy.

"GETTING WHAT YOU PAY FOR IS NOT NECESSARILY TRUE WHEN buying software," Dudley said. "Software value is often over-inflated and shopping around is wise." It will pay off in the long run to go through the trouble of looking at several programs. Ask others in your business what they use.

"Buy something that looks like more than you need, rather than something that looks like less than you need," she

SOFTWARE CHECKLIST:

- List what you need
- Shop around; ask others in the industry
- Buy as much as your budget allows
- Read the licensing agreement
- Ask cost of updates/upgrades
- Look for initial customer support that comes with purchase
- Inquire about extended service plans
- Know the software's system (hardware) requirements
- Read the directions and get started right

UNIQUE USES

"I want to see all your foals by..."

If you've worked at a big breeding farm, you've probably had people come by and ask to see all the foals you have on the property by a certain stallion.

It's a testament to how good a memory an employee has, if he or she can immediately whip out a list of three or four off the top of his or her head. Usually someone ends up thumbing through the mare book, jotting a list on a sticky note, trying to remember where the mares are housed.

At the Lazy E Ranch in Guthrie, Oklahoma, you check your personal digital assistant. About once a week, employees download

all the latest ranch data to their personal digital assistant, using a wireless connection to the lab laptop, which is networked to the server in the ranch office.

If someone wants to see Zan Parr Jack foals, within seconds, they'll have a list of mares, neckband numbers, foaling dates, if they had a colt or filly, whether or not they're still on the farm and exactly where they are on the ranch and the dam's pedigree.

Those personal digital assistants come in handy out in the field, too, if they need to quickly identify a mare or contact an owner. The ranch's horse database is in their pocket, not a three-ring binder back in the office.

added. It's a good rule of thumb to buy as much in a software system as you can afford. That way your horse business can "grow with what you buy."

In addition, you want to buy from a company that looks like it's here to stay. "Make certain that the company is doing everything it can to not just stay current with the industry, but to move ahead of it," Dudley said. "Look for a company that continues to upgrade and patch the software."

She also advised reading the software license. The license is your contract with the company when you buy the software. "The license should state their commitment to maintain the integrity of the software for the customer, and that the product you are buying should do what it says it will do," Dudley said. "If it fails, it is their responsibility to correct the programming."

Look for what the company offers in terms of extended service. "There are several companies that have add-on fees or monthly fees toward the maintenance of the program," Dudley pointed out. "Sometimes there are charges you didn't know you'd have to pay for along the way. You should consider the cost of a year's usage plus the initial purchase of the software when you make your decision."

She also said you should expect a certain amount of free customer support/service to help you get started with the software. "Beyond that, if you buy an extended service contract, it should not only include someone helping you if you have a problem, it should also bring you up-to-date with upgrades and updates and keep you informed."

Once you settle on a system, do everything you can to get started on the right foot. "The setup is the big thing," Dudley said. "It doesn't matter what program you're talking about." Before you enter any farm data, she added, "Read the

documentation. I know we all hate to read directions, but it will prevent you from making some mistakes."

If you need to know: When you purchase a program, the software company will often provide updates and upgrades. Updates are "tweaks" that keep your program current and healthy; they are often free, considered to be part of the license you purchased with the program. Upgrades typically add something new to the program that wasn't there before; they typically come with an additional charge.

HARDWARE

THERE'S A LOT TO DECIDE WHEN YOU BUY HARDWARE, WHETHER it's at an electronics store or online. You might be asked to choose everything on your computer from the monitor to megabytes of RAM, and it can be daunting, especially if it you have no idea what those are.

If you're buying hardware with a specific software system already picked out, you might want to begin with the software system requirements; that's what the software company says a computer must have to run its program. It can act as a buying guide checklist for you when you look at hardware.

Dudley again advised, "When you buy hardware for your farm, buy the most you can for your money. You will be amazed how quickly you need things like more memory, a CD-burner, etc. You might not think that when you start out.

"Once you buy the basic unit," she continued, "the add-ons become cheap. Don't just have a starter computer."

If you need to know: For basic advice in buying a computer, check out the book, "Buying a Computer for Dummies," by Dan Gookin, or "The Official Guide to Buying, Connecting and Using Consumer Electronics Products," published by the Consumer Electronics Manufacturers Association.

If you have Internet access, go to the Federal Citizen Information Center online brochure "Life Advice" About Buying a Computer," at www.pueblo.gsa.gov/cic_text/misc/buy-computer/buycomp.htm.

Other things to think about.

Back up

THERE ARE TWO TYPES OF BACKUP YOU NEED: BACKUP COPIES OF your data and a battery backup for your computer's power supply.

"I suggest you have an automatic backup for your system data," Dudley said, "or be careful to back up manually every day to a disk." If you have a hardware failure and lose all the information stored in your computer, a backup disk can restore lost data.

Often farms will have another data backup disk (backed up monthly) that is kept off the farm premises, in case of a



Battery back-up systems come in all shapes and sizes. Be sure it offers power-surge protection.

catastrophe such as a fire. Some places store the software installation disks the same way.

You should also have your computer plugged into a battery backup system that will keep you running and/or give you time to shut the computer down properly if the power should go out. You want a battery backup that also provides power surge protection for your computer.

Networking

WHEN YOU WANT TO CONNECT TWO SEPARATE COMPUTERS, whether in the same room or buildings apart, you are setting up a "network."

"I am often asked if it's possible to share one program with multiple computers," Dudley remarked. "That is a hardware issue for the most part."

To network, the computers must have a network card as part of their hardware. If you think you want a network in the future, go ahead and include that when you select your hardware.

You can make a one-to-one connection via a specialized Ethernet wire, or via a wireless device. If you're connecting computers in the same office, it's fairly easy; connecting between two buildings requires a direct line connection or a powerful remote. A network of three or more computers is more expensive, requiring a more complex setup.

"Networking also requires certain add-on components to your software that are generally available by license," Dudley said. "It's typically a module that you purchase in addition to the basic application that allows you to network."

Going Online

"MOST OF US OUT ON THE FARM ARE AT THE POINT WHERE WE



Some farms use laptops, like this, out in the field and network it with an office computer.

can get Internet service," Dudley said.

To connect, you need the hardware on your computer (some kind of modem), a way to connect, and an Internet Service Provider to give you access to the World Wide Web and e-mail.

Getting the hardware on your computer and finding an ISP are fairly easy; making a connection in rural areas can be tricky. There are different ways you can connect to the Internet, through a dial-up service, (a telephone connection), through cable television service (a cable modem) or through DSL (digital subscriber line, connection through high-speed copper cables).

"A lot of farms and ranches are in parts of the country that do not have DSL," Dudley said. "And it might be some time before it reaches them." Dial-up service is most common but because it is through a phone line, it can be easily interrupted.

"People need to find out what's available in their area," Dudley advised. ■