

New database program is takeoff from tried and proven program

Recently I visited with several cities and rural water districts to determine what if any databases they might be using to help their recordkeeping. What I learned is rather interesting. Most of the people I talked to are using the Excel spreadsheet program that came with Microsoft Office. While being an excellent spreadsheet program, it's not a database and I wonder if many small systems might want to consider other options.

Databases are designed for ease of use and efficient operation. They provide quicker access to data, reduction in data redundancy, cross-referencing and tracking, etc.

Since 1985 KRWA has been using a database called Q&A (Questions and Answers) by Symantec. This is a DOS based program; it's been the backbone for KRWA and many other businesses, cities and water districts for more than two decades. KRWA hauled computers and printers to many locations in the early 1980's to introduce micro-computers to water systems. This Q&A program was one of the softwares that KRWA trained on. Along with the database portion of the program there is a word processing program that allows multiple amounts of information to be entered into a document. It will then merge print a letter addressed to either one person or as many records that meet the retrieve parameters the user specifies. While

that program might be considered antiquated by many, it will run rings around some of the newer software – and it doesn't require a computer science major to retrieve data.

For example, a database can be created in Q&A to fit nearly any need a person or company may have. If you want to have a field for

performed by staff. There is one thing here that needs to be said. In the 24 years that KRWA has used this software, there has never been a need to contact the company for technical support, nor has the program ever locked up. It's been a real workhorse – and still is.

But as times change, so does

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e-mail addresses, then adding that field is very easy. The software can be programmed very easily to perform all sorts of calculations, such as adding sales tax or to determine balances. Almost anything you can think of wanting in a database can be programmed into Q&A.

Q&A can also print reports quickly and efficiently. KRWA maintains a database in Q&A called ML. This database presently contains more than 9,200 records. It is the Association's main database and is updated continuously. A report can be defined in as little as a minute. An example might be to list all water systems that have 100 to 500 customers that purchase water and have water rates in excess of \$35 for 5,000 gallons. Simply, if you have the information, the software will segregate the records to fit the retrieve parameters and it will provide that printout in a few seconds.

Another use of the database for KRWA is to provide monthly, quarterly and annual reports to agencies and the Association board of directors concerning work

technology. Jazzing up reports is not easy to do with Q&A. We export the information to a text file and then insert the data into an Excel file which allows a user to change the appearance of a report. Another downfall is that in the changing world of computers we have been informed that the DOS version of Q&A will not run on the new 64 bit computers.

Presently KRWA is working to upgrade or change to a new database program that still in principle works very much like the older Q&A in a windows based program. KRWA has purchased a program called Sesame. The developers of Sesame were "hard core" users of Q&A and wanted to create a product that would easily convert Q&A databases with minimal changes. And they've succeeded, including retaining the familiar one keystroke search, previous record and forward commands, among others.

Another marvel is that the new Sesame program is capable to translating an existing Q&A database into a Windows based database. It retains all the data, file



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specs, and reports from the old DOS-based file. Once translated into Sesame, the user can make

changes to the screen setup and tweak it with changes in fonts, borders, etc. Additional reports can

be produced with relative ease. Exporting and importing, mass deleting and mass updating are processes that all Q&A diehard users know and use frequently. Like most software, the more you work with the product the easier it becomes. However, if a report is needed outlining certain criteria, the Q&A program will still provide the results in a lot less time.

There are other companies that provide database software for systems and companies to use. However research is needed to find the software that is best suited to your needs and use. KRWA looked for a new database because the Q&A DOS program will be incompatible with the next generation, 64-bit computers.

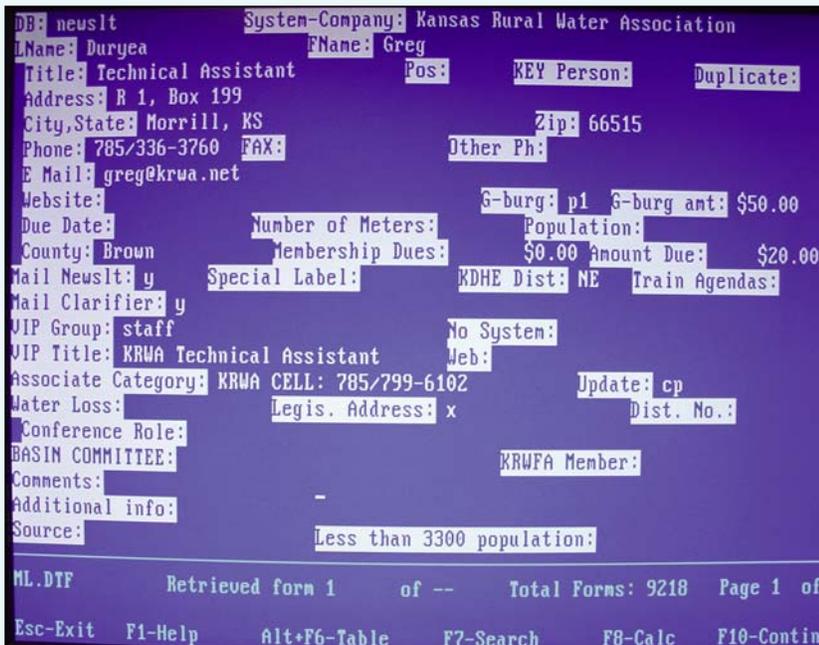
We also purchased an add-on to the Sesame program to allow us to merge documents. There are more steps in setting up a Microsoft Word document but the ability to change fonts and or jazz up the document is easier than in Q&A.

Long-time computer retailer and software developer, Merle Windler of Thoroughbred Computer says, "Q&A is among the top bangs for the buck, as it is a very user-friendly program."

As I mentioned earlier, KRWA introduced and trained many water systems on Q&A beginning in the mid-80s. Some people may gasp at the thought of using software that's 20 plus years old. I will assure you, there are staff at KRWA who use it and can pull up answers in the time that it takes for many programs just to load.

If you are considering the use of a database I encourage you to look at several different programs and decide which is better for you. Also if you are interested in looking at the Sesame software, I would be glad to visit with you. Check out the program by Lantica Software by going to www.lantica.com, and downloading a trial version.

Databases: the old and the new



These two "screen shots" show one of the databases developed by Kansas Rural Water Association. The information is identical in each file. The old DOS version of the "Q&A" database program (on top) shows no 'drop down menus' common with more recent software programs. The marvel of the new Sesame database is that it will translate all the old DOS-based Q&A databases, including reports, into the new format below.

