



Littlewoods

Landau... "We anticipate growing opportunities in the rapidly developing fields of financial and information services."

ow many organisations realise that the successful management and quality of data gained as a result of its Information Technology (IT) strategy is not only a mighty weapon against com-

petitors but also a source of income from non-competitors? The Littlewoods Organisation plc is a UK mega-retailer with 1987-88 pre-tax profits up 14 per cent to £80m on sales of £1500m. Its activities involve football pools, chain stores, home delivery oper-

ations, catalogue shops, mail order companies and telesales operations. Over the past three years it has invested more than £100m to secure future growth. It is now using ROCC computers at the heart of its data capture and data prep system which enables it to market its services at a profit to non-competing organisations.

One such major investment was the birth of Credit and Data Marketing Services Ltd (CDMS) to service in-house and external information and financial needs. CDMS was originally set up to market an electoral role database, but then Littlewoods realised the fuller potential of the information it held.

CDMS managing director Malcolm Landau said, "Since the formation of CDMS we have developed in three separate business areas - Credit Cards, Information Services and Financial Services. Within our growing client base, increasing opportunities are being found to provide, or adapt, products from these three areas to satisfy individual client requirements."

When CDMS was established, it relied upon the strengths in credit management and in data resources that existed within The Littlewoods Organisation.

CDMS now manages ten credit card schemes (three of its own plus seven for external companies), provides seven information services products to companies wishing to tightly target promotional material to potential markets, and provides loan, insurance and savings plan financial services.

CDMS claims to have married the 'know-how' with the 'know-who' and that they are to direct marketing what the Swiss Army Knife is





It's a tight and well run dp department at Littlewoods' JM Centre by the team pictured: Back row l to r: Lyn Ho – systems operator, Frances Jones – input coordinator, Jacqueline King – data prep controller and Barbara Charles – systems operator. Front row l to r: Sandra McGlynn – systems operator, Vivien McCarthy, Sue Hughes (not inhouse that day, Lin Scattergood) who are all systems supervisors.

to cutlery. Food for the CDMS machinery is the data provided by Group Computer Operations (GCO).

In February 1988 a customer services department was set up within the group to establish those areas within GCO which could be self-supporting operations, generating external revenue. These include the information centre, responsible for all Littlewood PC requirements, Central Print and Mailing, and Central Services which incorporates data prep. Alan Keggin is the



Project manager Owen Williams is responsible for seeing that the data capture operations run smoothly.

GCO's customer services manager.

"GCO has more than 300 staff of which about 80 are involved in data prep, as well as 15 at our remote site in Crosby," said Keggin. "We have the largest commercial Honeywell installation in Western Europe which supports a wide variety of front-end systems. This includes data capture and data prep on three ROCC minicomputers.

"Until recently, as our end-user systems become more powerful and widespread, we saw a decline in the need for data prep," he added. "But with the development of a range of seven new services offered by CDMS, such as its new SuperProfile market segmentation service, data prep needs have begun to mushroom. We are processing an increasing amount of work for CDMS' electoral register database. 65 per cent of data prep's key depressions serve CDMS requirements, the remainder being for the chain store and home shopping operations."

"There has also been a change in the nature of our data prep work. Our dp has moved from small volume daily turnaround input, to mostly large volume on-going work.

"Some of our jobs though remain time critical, but the speed and flexibility of the ROCC computers has widened our options when it comes to prioritising work. If a job needs doing today, I know we can get it done today," said Keggin. Littlewoods has used ROCC (and

Redifon) minicomputers since 1977 for data capture. It upgraded its original Seecheck systems of the late '70s to three R400 systems in the early '80s supporting 72 terminals. In 1983 it upgraded again to two ROCC 2830 minicomputers. This allowed Littlewoods direct data communications between the ROCC 2830s and all of its mainframes, using disk to disk transfer.

"When we converted from the R400s to the ROCC 2830s, although we had always liked the ROCC computers, we did shop around," Keggin explained. "We



Keggin... "If a job needs doing today, I know we can get it done today."

also looked at ICL, McDonnell Douglas and Honeywell systems, amongst others."

"Our requirements for the new system," Keggin added, "was for high speed, low cost and high accuracy of conversion, a minimum of disruption to our daily work progress, system resilience and in-built immediate (terminals) growth potential. ROCC fulfilled all four requirements better than the other suppliers. Its support during conversion proved to be first class."

"The benefits of this upgrade meant that not only was it

cheaper to run the two ROCC 2830 machines than the three R400s, but we also got more work out of those two new machines – they each supported 32 terminals with the capacity to support 64 each," said Keggin. "We got improved localisation of verification and productivity."

Littlewoods' GCO subsequently purchased a ROCC 2840 to handle the added volume of work for CDMS, including processing of credit card payments and ongoing maintenance of the electoral role database, and to support the remote office in Crosby.

Work handled on the ROCC computers comprises bulk data entry, financial services, CDMS and electoral register database building and maintenance, including the capture of the 42m christian names of the people on the electoral register. Data prep for database work accounts for about 60 per cent of the key depressions increase.

The ROCC systems now support a total of 84 workstations including just under a dozen at Crosby. All tasks on all three systems can be switched to any two processors if necessary with no noticeable response degradation, Keggin said. This enables flexible hardware and/or software maintenance when necessary.

"We have also happily discovered that by cooperating with another ROCC computer user in the area," he added, "we have established on our doorstep a fortuitous reciprocal disaster backup arrangement. Although this was not an original consideration, it is a very valuable factor."

"Right now we could increase our workstations if we had a sudden need; this is a big plus point for us, and to know that it would not effect the data throughput."

Keggin also explained that they benefit from sophisticated data verification routines during keying which means cleaner, more accurate data. Data can be verified on the ROCC computers and need not wait for mainframe time.

Alan Keggin summarised the benefits which Littlewoods is reaping from its ROCC computers.

"We have many features now which we did not before," Keggin said. "Communication direct to our Honeywell and IBM mainframes, reliability, flexibility and system resilience, and potential for sizeable terminal and system growth.

"We are able to increase the number of data entry terminals at a moment's notice when necessary; we have achieved continuous throughput on any two of the three systems with no degradation; we have direct communications with our mainframes; rarely does any priority work get carried over to the next day, and we can better deal with seasonal fluctuations encountered in retailing peak periods." Keggin concluded. Littlewoods, aided by its substantial, reliable and flexible ROCC data capture facilities, is able to fully serve the dynamic needs of one of Europe's largest retailing operations.