Videotex takes Gateshead Teleshopping into the home

October 1979, when a study of shopping problems of disadvantaged or disabled insomers was commenced by Newcastle University, sponsored by Tesco, progress has been made in the development of an experimental computerised shopping service for the relatively housebound of Gateshead. Resulting from the formation of a working party between Tesco, Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC) and Newcastle University, various trials were initiated and a number of outlets opened, followed by negotiations with Rediffusion Computers Ltd on the introduction of a videotex system. Early in 1984, Gateshead MBC approved a 12-months trial of a videotex system as a basis for new outlets, incorporating individual households, and in May of this year the videotex system began business in a private home and in a sheltered housing development. This article looks at the progress being made in this third phase of development, and the way it is being sed by the consumers.

be Gateshead experiment in computerised teleshopping a disadvantaged sections of the community, which has risen to international prominence over the past three years, has entered its third and crucial phase of development. It is progressing from its base in neighbouring towns across all individuals with the installation of a videotex system linked by Rediffusion Computers to Gateshead MBC.

Colour videotex televisions have been placed in cupboards along with community points in sheltered housing in the Salt Moor area on the outskirts of Gateshead. The system is used directly by the elderly or disabled residents or by the local street wardens on their behalf. It also includes access to Tesco superstore in the town centre, the Gosty Hill psychiatric hospital, the Baptist Church, and a local chemist’s pharmacy.

The telephone also provides access to information on a community nature, such as information on local government, welfare benefits, and the telephone directory of local councillors. It has also formed the basis of a new link between Tesco Stores, Gateshead New College, and Gateshead Shoppers and Information Service, as it is known officially, arising from a study commissioned by Tesco from the University in October 1979. This shows that 25% of the population in the Tyne and Wear area were sufficiently constrained functionally to inhibit shopping to the town centre, and for many, shopping is the only way they can access information about their environment.

At present there are 430 consumers registered to use the SIS service, either from a telephone or from the telephone centre.

First, for those people with less serious mobility problems, special shopping and information outlets were established at three local points within selected neighbourhoods of the borough. The principle is that registered consumers can visit their nearest outlet and, if not using the help of a Shopping and Information Service (SIS) assistant, order goods from certain town centre shops and have these delivered at no additional cost. Alternatively, they can use the outlets to obtain information about forthcoming events, exchange local news with others of their choice, or seek advice on problems of social or welfare kind.

The second type of service operates from the headquarters of the Social Service Department in Gateshead. Here, a telephone centre acts as a special communication link to several hundred at-risk people who are literally housebound, including many who are bedridden or in need of personal care and attention. These people can transmit their shopping orders over the telephone and have their goods delivered to them, either at home or in the local shops. There is also a further service, rather than directed to the stones, because of the special social relationship that has been built up between the operators and the clients.

At present there are 430 consumers registered to use the SIS service, either from a telephone or from the telephone centre.

Network system

When visiting an outlet, or communicating by telephone, a consumer first consults a catalogue which lists the prices, sizes and weights of 1000 grocery items, together with 50 bakery products and 300 pharmaceutical products. Alternatively, such information can be called up by the videotelephone set which is connected to the outlet’s television set, and the choice available with particular commodity lines, and items that would best suit people on restricted diets. Each item is allocated a code number and it is this, together with the quantity of goods to be ordered, that is transmitted through the store.

At existing outlets – those provided under the earlier phases of the SIS scheme – the coded orders are typed into a microcomputer which is linked to the videotelephone set, and the information is then sent to the store via a minicomputer housed in the local authority’s computer department. Each of these computerised systems leads to the orders being printed out in the store, usually in a series of batches rather than for individual cases. The Tesco store currently receives orders for the bakery and chemist, and these will be furnished with the order forms as and when the level of demand for these more specialised goods warrants the investment.

The orders that come through to the store are printed with a carbon copy that is passed back to the customer at the time of delivery. Each batch of orders is also reprocessed in the computer to produce ‘picking lists’, and it is this picking-and-choosing process that is a time-consuming aspect of the service which, by virtue of the fact that assistants are effectively shopping on the customer’s behalf, is also labour intensive. The assistants who undertake this work and contribute to other parts of the service have been provided by the Home Services Commission.

Two delivery vans are employed throughout most of the day to transport the ordered goods to the customers. Payment is made at the time of ordering, except in the case of those housebound customers who place orders via the telephone centre and who pay, at the time of delivery.

A specially adapted television linked to a Rediffusion videotex computer would be used by a disabled person who relies on the system to provide goods and information without leaving home.

DoE sponsorship

The SIS service has been supported since April 1979 by a £100,000 grant from the Department of Environment under the Inner City Partnership Scheme. It has enabled the service to expand into new outlets and bring in new retailers, but it remains limited in scale. There are about 7500 people throughout the borough of Gateshead who are in need of shopping assistance, 5000 of whom are concentrated in the inner city areas, and Ross Davies of Newcastle University is now looking for further funding to expand the project’s horizons after the current grant runs out in May 1985.

Newcastle University, Gateshead MBC, and Tesco have shown that, to use Ross Davies words, the principle of using technology to channel the resources of a town-centre into small neighbourhoods is one that is available and of considerable help to those who are absolutely, or relatively, housebound. With the emergence of cable TV networks, the lessons learned at Gateshead could have implications for all sections of the community.

INCOME TAX RELIEF

ON SUBSCRIPTIONS

Members are reminded that the Institution is approved by the Commissioners of Inland Revenue for the purpose of the section 16, Finance Act 1958. This means that the complete IEEE subscription is allowable against assessment. To claim relief, the appropriate amount should be entered on members' income tax return forms, under the "Claims for expenses" section and quoting reference:

I N T E R N A T I O N A L
C U R R E N C Y
S U B S C R I P T I O N
DEPARTMENT,
THE INST ITUTION
OF ELECTRICAL ENGINEERS,
LONDON.