Becoming an Information Provider

The Information Provider and Prestel

Prestel is a collaborative venture in two quite different ways. Firstly it uniquely combines the capabilities of an adapted television set, a normal telephone line and a network of computers to provide an easy-to-use and inexpensive means of electronic communication.

Its second collaboration lies in the matching process between its users and its Information Providers. Prestel is an extremely versatile publishing medium with a range of electronic possibilities that distinguish its potential from the facts of life of paper publishing.

This folder's aim is to alert prospective Information Providers to the characteristics of Prestel that are likely to determine what information is right and what is the right way to present it.

We hope it answers most of your questions. We will be pleased to answer any others.

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Prestel Characteristics

In presenting information most effectively for your users, you should be aware of Prestel features which affect user attitudes towards the medium.

1 Simplicity: Prestel is a very simple system: anyone can learn how to operate it within a few minutes without any special training. This is very important, both for the businessman who wants information quickly and easily, and for the ordinary member of the public who would find conventional computer procedures very daunting.

2 Immediacy: The information on Prestel can be updated continuously by the Information Providers. The latest news and commodity prices, for example, are available throughout the whole network of computers around the country within a few minutes.

3 Scope: Prestel computers can store hundreds of thousands of pages of information, all of which are available at the press of a button. There is a tremendous range of information services available, from hard factual data to lively entertainment. This variety can be expected to increase, because the number of applications from would-be Information Providers is growing daily.

4 Communications: Unlike broadcast systems, Prestel enables users to be in direct contact with the computer, the Information Provider and other Prestel users, through response frames and mailbox facilities. These are described more fully in the next section of this booklet.

5 Selectivity: The Prestel user can choose and only has to pay for the pages he wants to see. Because of the links between pages on the database, information can be broken down easily and logically.

6 Intelligence: Prestel can record the number of times pages are accessed and pass on any revenue to the Information Provider concerned, therefore no separate billing system is required. Because of the routeing between pages, users can follow logical sequences, such as quizzes and games, which are not possible on more conventional media. It therefore has a certain amount of 'interactivity'.

7 Attractiveness: Prestel is enjoyable to use as well as being instructive. Information can be displayed in a compelling and attractive way, using colour and graphics.

8 Economy: Compared with sophisticated computerised information retrieval systems, Prestel is extremely cheap. It was designed from the outset as a system which would support large numbers of simultaneous users, performing a very simple series of tasks.

Prestel is available on the basis of a local telephone call in most parts of the country, which helps to keep its costs low.

9 Versatility: Prestel has already been put to a number of different uses. It can be used for selling valuable information at a premium, and also as an effective advertising medium. In-house communication and even buying and selling are also possible on Prestel.

Role of the Information Provider

Most new Information Providers go through a simple learning process in order to operate on Prestel with maximum effectiveness. Here we explain the steps that are involved.

Firstly an Information Provider (IP) will consider which subjects from the range of information available to him may be particularly suitable for Prestel presentation. The decision may be related to the level of financial commitment he wishes to make.

With some proposals in mind, the prospective Information Provider approaches our IP Sales group for advice. Through discussion with us and probably a Prestel service organisation (independent firms providing indexing expertise and subletting database space from Prestel) the information proposal becomes refined to the point where its overall attractiveness can be assessed and the decision taken whether to go ahead.

At this stage, Information Providers divide between those who choose to contract directly with Prestel and those who find it more economical or more convenient initially to rent pages from a Prestel service organisation. The second group are known as Sub-Information Providers, and may or may not be responsible for entering their pages onto the Prestel system.

When the page entering work is complete and the database is 'opened' to Prestel users, the good Information Provider continues to compare his offering against other databases looking for possible improvements and will examine his frame counts (the number of times users have looked at individual pages) to identify the most popular areas and build on them. He may also look to identify his users by utilising 'response frames' (see under 'Some Major Opportunities' later in this booklet), through which users can communicate back to Information Providers.

Entering Pages into Prestel

If you become an IP, you may wish to use one of the IP Service Organisations listed. Alternatively, you may wish to be responsible for entering your own information: this may save you money, but needs specialist staff of your own, who have learnt the database design.

There are three main ways of entering pages:

1 On-line Keyboarding
An Information Provider can edit his pages by dialling our Update Computer and typing on a Prestel set with an editing keyboard (similar to a typewriter with special keys for colours, double height etc). We can rent such a set to you or can put you in touch with other firms that rent them. Apart from the cost of your phone call (local rates if you are near the Update Computer in London, STD rates elsewhere) there is, at this time, no further charge.

2 Off-line Keyboarding
You may wish to save on phone costs by purchasing a more sophisticated editing terminal (costing from £3000 to £20,000) which allows you to create your pages off-line, and only phone our computer to feed

them at higher speed (1200 bits per second) once they are ready. Some of these terminals offer word-processing and similar facilities to make the keyboarding job faster and more efficient, which offers a further cost saving in manpower. We can advise you on the terminals available and their strengths and weaknesses.

3 Transfer to Computer Files
Your data may already be on a computer, though not in the format of Prestel pages. Various software programmes are now available for converting such files to Prestel format and putting them onto a magnetic tape that we will feed into Prestel for you. We can advise you on who to contact and how to use this facility.

Apart from these three methods, there are other technical possibilities, eg direct computer-to-computer link-ups. We would be glad to discuss these with you.

Who is Prestel for?

Prestel is simple to operate and is likely to penetrate a wide range of markets as its services grow.

We can identify four broad markets for Prestel sets:

1 Sets installed in private houses and paid for by individuals;

2 Sets installed in private houses but paid for by businesses. Possible customers include the self-employed, farmers, salesmen, mail order agents, insurance agents, and anyone who needs information at home;

3 Sets installed in business premises and used both for general and specialised information services;

4 Sets installed in public locations such as libraries, railway stations and hotels for use by members of the public. These sets can be coin-operated.

All of these markets are important and sales are being promoted vigorously in each of them. Some are obviously going to take off faster than others but it is important not to be dogmatic about the development of such a new medium as Prestel. There is a danger of Prestel being seen by some people as mainly for businesses and by others as primarily recreational. This would narrow Prestel's appeal and ignore its versatility.

Some Major Opportunities

Working in an electronic publishing medium is not a static process, and Information Providers should exploit the special facilities that Prestel offers.

Here we explain some particularly important features, Prestel has introduced.

Response Frames

These are pages where the users may send a message back to the Information Provider who

'owns' the page. They can be compared with coupons in a newspaper though no form-filling and postage is necessary. All the user needs to do is to press a few buttons and the information is despatched to the Information Provider.

Some obvious uses of response frames are:

- Requesting detailed information;
- Obtaining data; eg sales figures, opinions;
- Ordering goods or services;
- Booking seats, hotel rooms etc;
- Entering competitions.

The Information Provider can look at the response frames which have been completed by users at any time, so that messages could be retrieved within minutes of despatch. This facility has exciting possibilities, which are being vigorously exploited by many of our IPs.

Mailbox

This facility enables users to send messages to each other. There are free-format pages where the message can be typed in or pre-formatted messages for numeric keypads only.

Some of the more apparent uses are:

- Sending greetings ie birthday;
- Confirming orders or bookings;
- Transmitting confidential data;
- Leaving messages for elusive personnel.

Closed User Groups (CUGs)

This allows the Information Provider to restrict access to any of his pages so that only users he selects can see them.

This facility may be used to protect confidential or commercially sensitive material or simply as a means of charging users by subscription instead of on a per page basis.

Two particular attractions of CUGs are that they allow the Information Provider to write for a specialist audience without any concern. It has the advantage over a private viewdata system in allowing CUG members, possibly widely spread over the UK, to utilise the system incurring telephone charges at only local call rates.

Gateway Facility

This major development allows users to be routed via the Prestel public system to an Information Provider's private computer and can offer the Prestel user the benefits of that computer's facilities, principally through allowing more processing power and larger databases.

It will increase enormously the Information Provider's ability to respond to detailed questions, eg to provide quotations, or to offer more comprehensive reference services than are practicable on the public service.

Who provides Prestel?

Prestel is a co-operative venture. The service of computers and telecommunications is provided by British Telecom, the information by hundreds of independent organisations and the television sets and adaptors are supplied by retail and rental organisations.

Information Providers

An enormous range of organisations supply information on anything from the price of gold to what's on at the cinema. A directory of current Information Providers, and the range of information they provide, is given under the back retaining flap.

There are hundreds of organisations currently supplying information on Prestel. Some of these are contracted IPs, but a growing number operate under the 'umbrella' of one of the experienced service organisations.

The techniques of structuring and presenting information on this medium call for a new range of skills and expertise. These have been developed by the organisations who have been working on Prestel during its early stages. A list is supplied.

The range of information is so great and fast-changing that no attempt is made to summarise it here. Readers wishing to familiarise themselves with the scope of the database are recommended to spend several hours on the system using a printed Prestel directory.

British Telecom provides an index to the information services available. Provided that the Information Provider abides by the terms of his contract, and complies with a few simple rules on routeing and display of prices, British Telecom leaves it very much to his discretion what material to include, how to present it, and how much to charge for it.

Set Suppliers

All the major British television manufacturers and rental organisations and most leading television retailers are supplying Prestel sets to the public. There is a considerable variety of sets available, large and small, colour and monochrome. Some models are made which do not function as television sets — these are intended for the business market. Most sets, however, do have broadcast capability and are sold or rented through the normal channels for television, ie shops and showrooms in the High Street.

In addition, there are now Prestel adaptors on the market, which can be plugged into the aerial socket of any TV set to convert it to Prestel. As the cost of these adaptors, and of the TV sets with Prestel built-in, falls, new markets are opening up, offering new and expanded opportunities for Information Providers.

Becoming an Information Provider

Before you decide to apply to become an Information Provider, you should think seriously about the kind of information service you might provide:

- the topics you wish to cover and the frame requirement;
- the markets at which you would be aiming;
- the distinctive advantages which Prestel would give to the information;
- the resources you would need and would be prepared to commit to operating as a full-time IP;
- the ways in which you could promote your service;
- the most appropriate timescale.

We then recommend you meet with us in Information Provider Sales where we can answer your questions and advise on the best strategy.

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