FaxBack is a method of supplying information by fax without manual intervention by the information provider. It has been available in the UK for over 2 years and is currently used by many computer companies (including Lotus, Sage and Compaq) to provide product information, as well as by property agents to supply lists of available property and then details of individual properties, and to provide ‘yellow pages’ type information.

The recent demonstration I received at FaxBack’s offices was intriguing; the more I saw of the package, the more potential uses I could see for it. Essentially, FaxBack is a system which enables the information provider to store information, in ASCII or graphics form, and to supply to users by fax automatically. The method of use involves the information user telephoning FaxBack and using a touch-tone telephone to enter numbers as prompted by a series of recorded messages. The first call might be used to retrieve a fax of the system index. This would list all documents available, individually or in ‘packages’, giving a reference number for each. A second call would be used to order specific documents by number. The customers enter their fax number using the touch-tone phone, and also their phone number or extension, so that the fax can be correctly delivered once it arrives at their institution. The resultant fax is clearly marked to indicate that it was ordered by the person on that number or extension, so that it is not mistakenly treated as junk mail. The number of documents (1–20) which can be ordered in one call is set by the information provider.

It is possible to use 0800 (free) lines, 0345 (local charge) lines, normal lines or premium rate lines, thus providing information free or charging for it, depending on the type of use. It is also possible to charge users on credit cards; FaxBack has a facility for verifying that a credit card number is in the correct format, although it cannot check creditworthiness. Customers can also use FaxBack on a subscription basis. Each current account holder would be provided with a password and would then be able to have unlimited access to the system. If they do not renew at the end of the period, the password can be invalidated.

FaxBack can be used by an information ‘broker’ to combine information from several sources. Each information provider can input and amend their own data remotely, using a password system to prevent them from altering their rivals’ data. Customers would then have access to all information via one telephone number.

Technically, FaxBack requires a dedicated PC. Hard disk capacity will depend on use, but substantial capacity will probably be needed. If documents are stored in ASCII format, they will need about 2.5–3 Kb per page, but if stored in PCX (graphics) format, they will use nearer 150 Kb per page. ASCII pages can be stored in standard (80 column, 66 lines per page) or compressed (132 columns, 88 lines) format. ASCII and PCX formats can be mixed within documents, but not within pages.

The file organisation is set up with 100 possible directories. One is used as the cover directory, and
contains 2 standard cover sheets, which include your company logo at the top. The other 99 directories can be used to store documents as determined by the information provider. Within these directories, documents are numbered using up to 8 digits. The naming convention is document number with a .TXT extension for standard ASCII files, a .TX2 extension for compressed ASCII and a .PCX extension for graphics files. So files numbered 1001.TXT and 1001.PCX would both be selected when a customer ordered item 1001 on the index. The indexes are called catalogues and there can be up to nine of these.

Documents can be created in a wordprocessor, by exporting the document to ASCII; output files from databases can be similarly saved; most typeset or graphics documents can be converted to PCX either using the embedded software or with optional extras; also documents can be scanned and the scanning software can normally produce a PCX format file.

The entry-level system requires two phone and two fax lines. These will mostly be used as incoming phone lines and outgoing fax lines. For publishing applications, the system would generally involve a customer telephoning in and entering the number of a separate fax machine to receive the documents, but it is also possible to call from the handset of a fax machine and receive the document at the same machine; this places the cost of the fax transmission on the customer’s bill. If you have FaxBack working from a telephone system controlled by an internal PABX exchange, it can dial 9 before the customer’s fax number to obtain an outside line. It can block certain fax numbers, for instance international numbers, numbers in a particular country, or even specific fax numbers if they have previously defaulted on payment. In these cases, the customer will hear a message saying the number is invalid and giving the number they should telephone for further information.

Reporting can be as detailed as you wish. For instance, one report will print each document number with the total number of times it has been ordered, sorted according to level of use. Other examples include a journal listing of all documents by date and time ordered, analyses of calls grouped by fax number, or of new callers, call duration, and so on. The report generator is in database format, so that users can enter their own parameters. Reports can be exported to spreadsheets if required and can then, of course, be manipulated further within the spreadsheet.

The voice messages can be recorded from any telephone handset with a good-quality microphone. The messages are numbered. Some are specified messages which are activated at the appropriate points in the transaction. Other messages can be recorded to be activated when a document is ordered (e.g. when document 1001 is ordered, message 1001 states that it is an index of available documents), but for some reason this is only available on documents 1000–8999. This is probably a blessing in disguise as I would not like to be the person who had to record more than 8000 messages, but it does stress that the organisation and numbering of the documents within the system must be planned with care at the outset.

As regards ease of use, because the system involves a modem, any problems can be solved by having FaxBack dial in to the system and troubleshoot remotely. They can make any amendments and can even reboot the system if needed. From my brief assessment, the user manual seems easy to navigate and well-written. From the customer’s point of view, it is generally reckoned that at each level of message 15% of callers
drop out. FaxBack claim that the system of ordering an index, followed by specific document ordering avoids this.

Some obvious initial uses for academic publishers and learned societies would be for storing and supplying marketing and price information, sample request forms, conference and training course details and so on. These would all be supplied without any manual intervention, thus saving staff time, provided your customers/members could be persuaded to use the system! It should be relatively easy for societies to 'train' their members; it may prove more difficult for commercial publishers unless they print their FaxBack number as the main telephone number on their publicity material and catalogues.

Using a bit more imagination, FaxBack could also be used to provide current awareness information. A report run daily from the manuscript handling database could keep FaxBack up-to-date on recent and forthcoming papers. A paper could begin to be included on the system as soon as it is accepted, with extra data such as issue and page numbers being included automatically as they become available. For many publishers, this would make information available several months before actual publication. Authors could also dial in, if they wished, to see if their paper had been accepted, only needing to call the manuscript handling office if it is not on the list.

Going yet another step further, it is possible to store full text, either graphically as a typeset page, or in ASCII form, and to provide a full CASIAS and document delivery service. It would be possible, and preferable from the customers' point of view, for several publishers to combine to provide, for example, a biomedical or legal service. There are obvious advantages over other docdel systems for the publisher, such as full control, full feedback, and full fees. There are also difficulties, such as the amount of storage required for large volumes of documents in graphics form. Perhaps it might be possible, especially if the cost and convenience were good, to persuade customers to accept the ASCII form of the text with figures in graphics form at the end of the paper. This would cut storage requirements dramatically.

This system could be used to supply current awareness information either free or for a fee, and also to supply documents for a fee. It could also be used as an added extra for subscribers, who could either have full access to the system as a bonus for holding a paper subscription, or as an alternative. Good use of the reporting facility for marketing would also enable publishers to gain a subscription from an institution if it is making major use of one journal for individual articles.

At around £10,000 for the entry-level system (excluding the cost of a PC and extras such as the credit card program), the system could be cost-effective for a major publisher. The price is likely to be too high for a smaller publisher alone, but could be financially viable if publishers grouped together by subject area.

Sue Thorn The Journal of Endocrinology Ltd.
Stedman’s/25 For WordPerfect. UK Version.

Williams & Wilkins, Baltimore, USA. Available in the UK from Waverley Europe Ltd, Broadway House, 2-6 Fulham Broadway, London SW6 1AA Compatible with WordPerfect 5.0 and above (IBM) or 2.0 (Macintosh).

Price: £60.00 + VAT (single user); £205.00 + VAT (5 users).

Spell-checking medical material on a word-processor can be more trouble than it’s worth if every mildly technical term produces a ‘not found’. Then you either have to skip it or add it to your own customized dictionary on the disk. Much of this can be avoided by ‘medical enhancement’ of your spell-checker, which is what is offered by Stedman’s/25 For WordPerfect software.

This package contains the standard WordPerfect dictionary plus over 150,000 medical words and phrases, with both anglicized and American spellings. Greek characters are included, as are foreign diacritical marks.

Hyphenation, or lack of it, is a potential stumbling-block that the program handles well, as the more common prefixed words are passed both with and without hyphens. So, both ‘pre-term’ and ‘preterm’ are fine, as are ‘intraoperat’ and ‘intraoperative’.

Less usual ones would need a hyphen to be recognized: ‘hyperproliferative’ and ‘interexperimental’ are unacceptable without.

A wide range of medical acronyms and abbreviations are incorporated, including most standard abbreviations for journal titles. There are, however, some curious omissions, for example: UVB, HPLC, AUC, CFU, ANC, AML, SCLC, among others, in the texts that I ran past the program. Certain combinations of letters and numerals are accepted, like CO2, 39mTe−, LD50.

Although, according to the program’s packaging, it includes ‘generic and trade drug names’, the coverage, especially of trade names, is disappointing. There is ‘cimetidine’ but no ‘Tagamet’, ‘ranitidine’ but no ‘Zantac’, ‘ibuprofen’ but no ‘Brufen’, ‘fluoxetine’ but no ‘Prozac’.

I tested the package on medical publications on four different subjects: intravenous immunoglobulins, growth factors, dietary fibre and retinoids. Overall, it performed very well, offering massive advantages compared with the standard WordPerfect spell-checker, which can be so inconvenient with medical material as to be virtually unusable. Coverage of complex areas like bacteriological terminology is good, though obviously not exhaustive. However, more specialist terms can be added to the program’s vocabulary through the creation of your own ‘dictionaries’.

My main criticism would be the few simple errors and oversights that have slipped through, especially in the area of anglicization. It is very annoying to be told that ‘aetiological’, ‘hypercholesterolaemia’, ‘ileocaecal’ and ‘phytohaemagglutinins’ are spelt wrong when their American versions are quite acceptable to the program. In the majority of cases American and English spellings are given correctly so these are simply mistakes. There are also, I believe, some straight typos: for example, ‘ecosanoid’ instead of ‘eicosanoid’ (‘eicosanoids’ is given). Some plurals are not recognized, like ‘enterocytes’ and ‘phytates’. ‘Disperseable’ is not accepted, for some reason.

Installation is relatively straightforward, though more complicated than implied on the package’s ‘Quickstart’ card, which features only the first couple of steps. More instructions follow on-screen.

Overall, I found Stedman’s/25 For WordPerfect a very useful tool indeed: it opens up the medical subject area to all the familiar spell-checking applications. (I just quickly ran a set of book proofs through it, with highly gratifying results.) If you handle a lot of technical medical material, this is certainly a worthwhile investment.

Kay Hyman
freelance editor

*Software reviews in Learned Publishing are edited by Sue Thorn, who would be glad to receive programs for review or offers to review programs. Her address is: Ms Sue Thorn, The Journal of Endocrinology Ltd., 17–18 North Court, The Courtyard, Woodlands, Almondsbury, Bristol BS12 4NQ.