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Computers Can't Shop for You Yet

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WHEN computers were in their infancy our imaginations were stirred by predictions that we soon would enjoy the luxury of having them do our shopping, as well as a lot of our work.

Computers do a lot of things for us but if you want to eat you still must drive to a supermarket, push a cart and stand in line at the checkout counter while a clerk adds up your bill.

Restocking the family larder was easier before computers were invented. All you had to do was pick up the phone and place your order. An hour or two later a delivery boy would place your groceries on a kitchen table and the breadwinner would settle the bill on payday. No delivery charge and no carrying charge.

Big retailers still are talking about "teleshopping," and a two-way information service called "videotex" has arrived but there seems to be limited demand from consumers for it.

One snag is how to get the merchandise to the purchasers. Items may be perishable or too bulky for mail or parcel delivery. Free delivery isn't mentioned and might not even exist.

Although the idea of picking up cash from computerized teller machines at banks is more widely accepted, you see customer lines at lobby windows and drive-in facilities but seldom at computers. Electronic bill paying seems to be too fast for a lot of us.

A Chicago consulting firm has predicted that by the mid-1990s as many as 30 million households will be paying $15 a month or more for computer-based information systems for shopping, etc.

Perhaps, but a tour of computer stores indicates that video games are the most popular home utilization to date. Sales people and youngsters seem to understand computers for fun and games but few clerks can tell prospective buyers much about uses.

Cut-throat competition among the nation's 200 computer manufacturers has resulted in drastic price cuts and reduced profits for most.

This may increase sales of home computers but some prospects may wait to see which firms survive. They might not want to buy a model whose maker is out of business.

Prices advertised for home computers begin at $100 but these are only the beginning. In order to make them work you will need "software" for programming, probably a videotube and perhaps a printer and telephone "modem."

The highly touted idea that many employees would be doing their jobs by computers in their homes hasn't caught on widely yet, either. One company that trains people for "computer cottage work" reported 12 students, with up to $25,000 tuition paid through state or local job training programs out of federal education funds.

Computer enthusiasts also have predicted that newspapers will be delivered to homes via videoscreens. Computers are used by writers and typesetters but subscribers still want their papers delivered to their front doors daily to read what they want when they want it.