

# TI closes its retail stores, opens Learning Centers

By David Needle, IW Staff

Texas Instruments will phase out its small network of TI-owned retail stores in favor of a unique program intended to support both dealers and users of TI products.

A spokesman for TI said that while its small network of 12 retail stores was established to mark TI's presence in key markets and to give the firm's salespeople firsthand experience, TI now feels it can achieve these goals through independent dealers, thanks to the evolution of the marketplace.

The spokesman said TI will replace stores with "Texas Instruments Learn-

ing Centers" over the next few years.

TI, which like Atari and Commodore sells most of its home computers through traditional mass-market channels such as department stores, opened its first TI Learning Center in Chicago this past January. By the time you read this, two more centers will have opened, in San Francisco and in Santa Clara, California. In all three cases, the Learning Centers are replacing TI-owned retail stores.

Although the new Learning Centers will not sell any TI products, they are expected to generate more sales at the stores that carry TI products and to

function as resource centers for those retailers.

While TI is studying "a number of different options," Oliva could not predict how many, if any, more Learning Centers would be opening this year. "The Learning Centers are a partnership program. We want to help our retailers and, at the same time, provide affordable education for consumers," said Oliva.

TI has hired "a cadre of field-resource consultants" to work part-time at the centers. "Many of the consultants are educators that we will train, but we'll also have a number of

people with computer backgrounds," said Oliva.

One service the centers will offer will be ongoing two-to-three-hour seminars on the subject "Do I Want A Home Computer?" Oliva said the seminar provides a comprehensive overview of what a home computer can do, including information on applications and computer literacy.

"We don't go into a competitive analysis. The courses are designed to tell people what a home computer does," said Oliva.

People will be able to attend the introductory seminar at a cost of between \$15 and \$20, which they can deduct from the price of a new TI home computer—should they decide afterward to go to a retail store to buy one.

"The retailers we've talked to in Chicago have been enthusiastic. We think it will work, but we're still in a learning phase," noted Oliva.

TI introduced its first home computer, the 99/4, two years ago with big expectations, but its relatively high price, limited software and calculator-style keyboard combined to produce sluggish sales, well below the company's forecast.

Last year TI came out with another version of the machine, called the 99/4A, which is priced lower and features a traditional typewriter-style keyboard and a lot more software. (The TI version of Logo is reported to be selling very well, and in some cases is credited with making hardware sales happen.) Sales figures for the past six months reveal that the new version is selling far better than the initial release, surpassing even TI's own sales projections.

## 'Seven major thrusts'

According to Oliva, TI has identified "seven major thrusts" it plans to focus on in the next few years with the aid of the Learning Centers.

1. The centers will offer a series of courses for both the beginner and the advanced computer user.
2. Ongoing programs and events at various retail stores will be sponsored by the Learning Centers; these will be intended to promote home computers and answer questions about home computers in general and TI products specifically.
3. The centers will offer activities dedicated to schools and educators, and will make TI equipment available to schools.
4. They will support dealers of the more advanced TI small-business computers and products.
5. Courses on vertical-market application packages, such as one for realtors, will be given at the centers.
6. Summer activity programs will be set up. Events will take place at Learning Centers, YMCAs and other locations suitable for children and parents to attend.
7. A corporate and industrial thrust that is intended to get professional managers and personnel into the Learning Centers will be initiated; programs detailing what TI has to offer will be set up.

According to Oliva, TI has had the  
*See Learning Centers, page 21*



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# VisiCalc linked to world's largest on-line data base

**By John Markoff, IW Staff**  
HOUSTON, TX—VisiCalc's reputation for sneaking personal computers into the executive suite is about to be magnified by the linkage of the popular software package to the world's largest on-line economic data base.

VisiCorp, maker of the whole line of "Visi" software products, has announced a joint agreement with Data Resources (DRI) that will allow personal-computer users to use VisiCalc to download and manipulate DRI's data base of more than 10 million business and economic indicators. DRI, located in Lexington, Massachusetts, is a subsidiary of McGraw-Hill.

"VisiCalc will now allow for first-time personal computer users to access the whole world's data," said Terry Opdendyk, president of VisiCorp, which is based in San Jose, California.

The significance of the agreement is that personal-computer users will, for the first time, have easy access to a vast economic data base that they can store and manipulate on their own personal computers, according to Opdendyk.

VisiCorp is also promising a price breakthrough in the cost of on-line information.

"In the past, electronic information has been costly," said VisiCorp marketing vice-president, Thomas Towers. "Our agreement with DRI will

result in a cost breakthrough. Users will pay only for the information they use, not for on-line and connect charges."

Towers noted that the link between VisiCalc and DRI would transform the electronic spreadsheet into a telecommunications package.

"We are making an effort to make the system transparent to the user and stressing its ease of use," he said.

Towers called the new VisiCalc capability the missing link needed to make large data bases easily accessible to individuals.

"In the past, data bases like DRI have

been costly and accessible only to a few users. Now it will be possible to download business and economic information on virtually any subject, overlay it with VisiCalc templates and analyze it," Towers said.

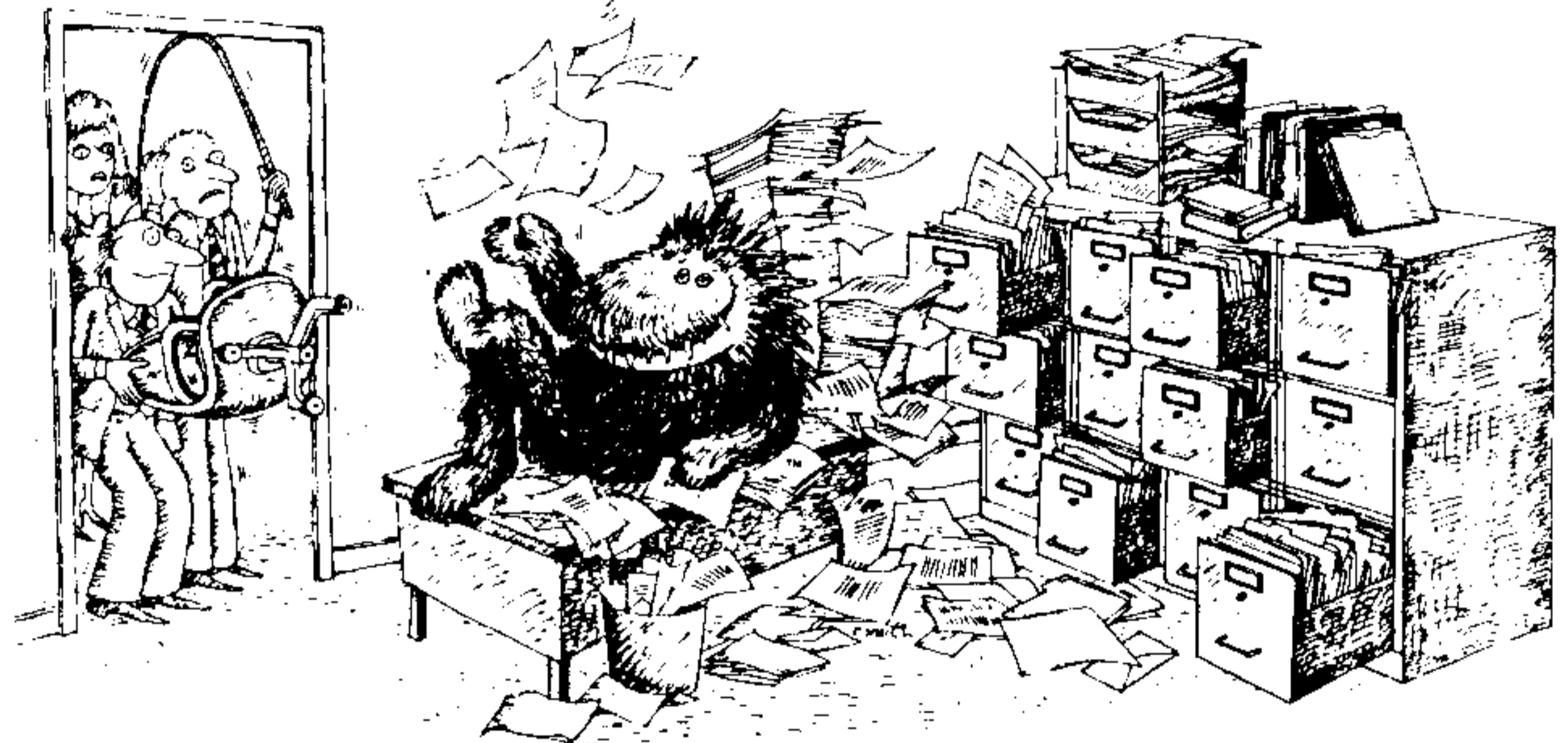
The range of information available from DRI will include data on stocks, the census, corporate sales, Department of Defense contracts, cost-of-living figures and other business and demographic data.

"We expect this to become a key tool for market researchers and business analysts who wish to systematically study the strengths and weaknesses of

competitors," said Towers.

A key stumbling block in the past has been the fact that data has frequently not been in the common format needed for easy analysis. According to Opdendyk, DRI has extensively modified its on-line data so that the data can now be accessed, stored and manipulated by VisiCalc users.

DRI's data base will be made available via modem over a variety of telecommunication links. Opdendyk said that VisiCorp plans to make the product available for the entire range of computer systems supported. ■



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### Learning Centers

*continued from preceding page*  
equivalent of the Learning Centers running internally for several years. "We've got plenty of videotapes that we've used at TI to educate our people and will be selecting several of those tapes for use in the stores," said Oliva.

While the Learning Centers will only be in a few cities this year, TI has started another program that Oliva referred to as a Product Sales Representation program, which is designed to augment TI's home-computer-division operation.

"We've engaged a network of educators who will be available to answer questions on home computers specifically," noted Oliva. The educators will travel to various TI retail locations, starting this summer. ■

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