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TI's Easy-To-Use Home Computer

While Texas Instruments Inc. in early June again decided not to make its long-expected announcement of a low-priced, consumer-oriented personal computer, it did introduce its intermediate-size home computer, called 99/4 and priced at $1,150. And that made it seem all the more likely that the lower-priced model would be out before Christmas -- in time to give the home-computer market its first real test.

If TI finally does come out with a minimal-performance model with a price tag of about $500, it will be up against such other consumer marketing heavyweights as Atari Inc. and Mattel Inc. But the question is not so much the competition as the market. Many observers tend to agree with analyst Benjamin M. Rosen of Morgan Stanley & Co., who says, "The $500-or-so market for consumers will be a very difficult sector to exploit over the next couple of years."
Aiming high.

Although most observers believe that a mass market is bound to emerge in the mid-1980s, Rosen and others are not convinced that consumers yet perceive a need for a personal computer. Indeed, many of the few models and features introduced at the recent trade shows are clearly aimed at the already defined, and growing, markets for the higher-priced personal computers -- particularly hobbyists, professionals, schools, and very small business (BW -- June 11).

TI's move to join Apple, Radio shack, and Commodore in those markets on June 1 was a last-minute decision. Like its rival's machines, TI's 99/4 costs considerably more, and offers considerably more, than the consumer-oriented, entry-level machines. The price includes the keyboard console, built-in Basic software for users who want to write their own programs, and a 13-in. color-TV display. The price is about the same as for Apple Computer Inc.'s model without a TV monitor and about $200 more than Radio Shack's most comparable unit with black-and-white monitor.

However, TI's computer differs radically from its competitors' in one important respect. The 99/4 is programmed with easy-to-use, plug-in semiconductor modules. Programs already announced include household budget management (priced at $45), investment analysis, personal recordkeeping, and video chess ($70). A dozen more will be on the market later in the year.

The Dallas semiconductor giant is confident that the program modules and other features of its new line will open up the home market. "The reason why the computer's entry into the home is not as rapid as some people expected," says Peter L. Bonfield, manager of TI's Personal Computer Div., "is that the machines first have to be easy to use."