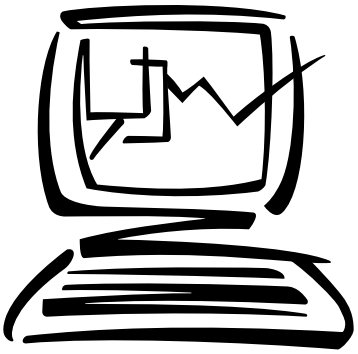

Connecting to the Internet

The Internet (also called the Information Superhighway, the Net, or cyberspace) is a global network of computers that allows rapid, worldwide communication. Currently (July 1999), more than 88 million people have access to the Internet. The purpose of the Internet is to communicate and share information.

The Internet: not just the Web

Because the term "Web" is often used to refer to the Internet, many people think the Web *is* the Internet.

In reality, the Web is only part of the Internet. Other Internet services include e-mail, chat rooms, file transfers, and news groups.

You may receive radio and television programs from the Internet using streaming audio and video.

Unix- and Linux-based computers can connect to the Internet, too.

Many television channels have Web sites where you can get the "rest of the story."

Cable television companies ovten provide speedy cabel connetions to the Internet.

Uses of the Internet

A computer connected to the Internet can turn your home, community center, library, or school into a source of unlimited information and communication. Uses include browsing the Web; visiting companies, governments, museums, and schools; reading the news; exploring libraries; shopping; sending electronic mail; joining mailing lists; chatting; and running programs on other computers.

Connecting from home

You need four main components to get connected to the Internet: a computer, a modem, an Internet Service Provider, and software.

Computer

For PC access, a Pentium processor is recommended, rated at 166 MHz or faster. With Windows 95/98 you'll need at least 16 MB of RAM; 24 MB of RAM or more will allow faster Internet cruising. A sound card and speakers are also recommended so you can hear the audio information on the Internet.

For Macintosh access, choose a PowerPC or better (for example, iMac™ or G3™), which includes a faster computer processor and built-in multimedia capability. System 7 or OS 8 is necessary, and, again, 16 MB of RAM is workable as a minimum, but 24 MB or more is better.

While you can connect to the Internet with an older computer (386/486 PC or pre-Power-PC Mac), you will be limited in what you can do.

With either a PC or a Macintosh system, a color monitor (SVGA,15-inch or larger) is recommended for easier viewing. For more information on purchasing a computer, refer to Texas Agricultural Extension Service publication MKT-3373, "Buying a Computer."

Modem (with access to a telephone line)

A modem allows digital data to be transmitted to and from your computer over phone lines. It's best to choose a modem with a speed of at least 28,880 bps (referred to as 28.8 K). Faster modems (33.6 K and 56 K, for

What can I do on the Internet?

The main thing you can do on the Internet is find information, from a multitude of sources. Many other activities are possible, too.

Shopping: One of the fastest-growing Web activities is shopping. You can browse online catalogs, choose merchandise, and pay for your purchases online. For safety tips, see "Online Shopping and Security," (MKT-3379).

Electronic mail (e-mail): E-mail is similar to paper-based mail. You can exchange letters (messages) with anyone on the Internet as long as you know his or her e-mail address.

Software: Many companies provide updates via the Internet. Huge collections of free and low-cost software are also available on the Internet.

Help for "Newbies": Surfing the World Wide Web can be frustrating to a new user. For more information, see these publications:

Evaluating Internet Information (MKT-3374)

Glossary of Internet Terms (MKT-3375)

Internet Etiquette: "Netiquette" (MKT-3376)

Child Safety on the Internet (MKT-3377)

Navigating the World Wide Web (MKT-3380)

example) are also available, but it's wise to check with your Internet Service Provider (ISP) to see what speed it supports. If your ISP supports only 28.8 K Internet access and you have a 56 K modem, your speedy modem will automatically slow down to 28.8 K to communicate with your ISP. If you are buying a new modem, make sure that it supports the V.90 standard.

Internet Service Provider

There are different types of Internet Service Providers (ISPs), and different systems of charges. Choose the one that is best for your pocketbook and the ways you plan to use the Internet.

Content and service providers: For a monthly fee, you can receive services from major online services such as America Online (AOL), CompuServe, or Prodigy.

Pros

- Specialized services and content: online newspapers, chat rooms, and games.
- Setting up is usually easy.
- May have kids' areas and controls to restrict children's access to adult content.

Cons

- Online services lack flexibility in browser software.
- Internet services may be an add-on.
- Possibly limited Internet access.

Service providers: Internet Service Providers (ISPs) are companies that provide Internet access and services.

Pros

- Access to everything on the Internet.
- Usually give e-mail accounts, Web access, and space for your own Web pages.
- No built-in kids' areas or controls to restrict children's access to adult content.

Cons

- Does not offer subscribers special content.
- Software not as easy to set up.
- Cost may be higher.

Many communities have local and national providers that offer Internet service. Look for a provider that offers a local telephone number (to avoid long-distance charges), a large number of incoming lines, and high speed Internet connections to better serve you. Some providers also offer an 800-number service (although there is usually an additional hourly charge). Compare several providers to get the price and services that are right for you.

Internet access costs: There are different ways an Internet service provider can charge you for the time you spend on the Internet.

Pay-as-you-go. An ISP will offer a certain number of hours per day or month for a set fee. If you exceed the total number of hours, you usually are charged for every extra hour. If you are a heavy user these charges could become quite costly. You might want to opt for a flat-rate plan.

Monthly fee (flat rate). Usually for $15 to $25, you can use the Internet all you want. Be aware that a high number of users may clog the lines and result in endless busy signals. If you can't connect, the unlimited access isn't very useful.

Setup charges. Some ISPs also charge a fee for setting up your connection to the Internet.

Finding Internet providers: Providers typically include local phone companies (GTE, SW Bell, etc.), long-distance carriers (AT&T, MCI, Sprint, etc.), national online service companies (America Online, Prodigy, Netcom, etc.), and locally owned firms in your community. To find local Internet providers:

- contact your local phone company.
- look under "Internet Services" or "Computer Services" in the yellow pages of your phone book.
- purchase a connection kit from your local computer store.
- check with your local library, school, or computer vendor.

You can also check out "The List" at http://thelist.internet.com/. This Web site contains service and cost information for ISPs around the world. You can view ISPs by area code, state, or county.

Software

You'll need a "browser" (a software program that allows you to look at Web pages). Usually Netscape Navigator™ or Microsoft Explorer™ (along with the dial-up access software) are included in the materials you receive when you sign up with an Internet provider. Check with your ISP. If a browser is not provided by your ISP, you will need to get one independently. Your computer operating system may come with a browser, or you could buy one from a book store or a computer store.

Questions to ask your ISP

Choosing an Internet provider is like choosing your long distance phone carrier, doctor, hairdresser, or contractor. Education is the key. Some useful questions to ask are listed below:

- Is the access call local?
- What type of connection do I get? PPP is preferred for Internet access.
- What services do I get? Examples include full Internet access or e-mail only, specialized content, etc.

Making connections

Modems. It's best to choose a modem that complies with the ISO V.90 standard. with a speed of 56K. It's also wise to check with your ISP to see what modem speed it supports.

ISPs. Internet Service Providers are organizations that allow users to dial into ISP computers (for a fee) to connect to the ISP's Internet link.

ISPs generally provide users with an Internet connection and an e-mail address.

Some ISPs also provide World Wide Web browsing software.

They may also provide Web page creation and hosting services.

Phone charges

Consider phone charges when choosing your Internet provider.

Ideally, connecting to the Internet should be a local call. If it is a long-distance call, you will be charged long distance rates for the entire time you are connected.

If you plan to access the Internet while traveling, consider a national ISP or a local service that offers toll-free calling. The higher cost of these services may be worth the money you will save on long-distance phone charges.

More about access

Public access. In Texas, limited public internet access is provided in many public libraries. The limited access will allow you to "surf" the Internet; it will probably not allow you to use electronic mail, create your own Web pages, or play games. Check with your local public library to see whether they have a public access computer.

Web TV. Television sets that access the Internet through a low-cost computer device that connects to your phone line or cable TV hookup became available in late 1996. Although these new low-cost devices have limitations compared to a personal computer (no printer, no disk storage, and a lower-resolution display), for many people the disadvantages may be offset by Web TV's apparent ease of use and low cost.

- What are the costs? Examples include flat rate for unlimited use, hourly charges, or a combination of both.
- Are there any hidden charges? Examples include setup fees, software costs, etc.
- What is the size of the provider's modem pool (the number of people who can use the service at the same time)?
- What is the ratio of user accounts to modems? Ten accounts to 1 modem is good, less than 10 to 1 is better.
- What modem speeds are supported? For the most efficient connection, the ISP should support modem speeds at least as fast as your own modem.
- What (if any) Internet software is provided?
- Does the ISP provide an installation kit and instructions for configuring your computer to connect to the Internet?
- What technical support is provided? Is phone assistance available? During what hours? What is the response time?
- For commercial providers: Is the content something I'm interested in? Can I find similar resources on the Internet?
- What security does the ISP have in place?
- Is the ISP's software capable of blocking unwanted sites (child safety)?

More information

Bookstores and some libraries carry a wide range of Internet-related books, but, because the Internet changes and grows so quickly, other sources of information will probably be more current. Many magazines specialize in Internet and other computer-related information, and some news magazines and newspapers have technology sections. Some television programs feature Internet topics, and several cable channels (such as ZDTV) are devoted entirely to programs on computer technology.

Further publications in this series can be found at: http://texasextension.tamu.edu/techtips

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