Connection Options

Until recently, the two primary methods of accessing the Internet were through a network connection, allowing users of local area networks (LANs) to go online through their school or workplace systems, and dial-up connections through a modem and phone line. However, new connection options allow for greater speeds and flexibility, while keeping costs to a minimum.

The following are some of the newer connection options that you might want to investigate:

* Telephone Providers—Good connections usually.

* Cable Internet—These systems allow your computer to connect to the Internet through the same cable that carries your TV signal. Monthly service charges are usually not much more than standard modem connection costs, but you have to rent or purchase a "cable modem." Additionally, your computer will need an Ethernet card (a special circuit board that allows for network connections). Not all cable service operators offer this service; call your local operator for more information.

* Satellite connections—DirecPC (http://www.direcpc.com/) allows you to download Internet files via a satellite connection. This is an efficient method for receiving large Web graphics and other items, but you still need a modem connection for other features. You must purchase the connection hardware as well as subscribe to the service.

* Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN)—An ISDN line is a type of digital phone line that can transmit data many times faster than a conventional modem and phone line. To learn more about ISDN, go to http://www.isdn.ocn.com/index.shtml

* Wireless connections—Pagers, cellular phones and personal digital assistants (PDAs) now allow varying levels of Internet access, from notification of E-mail to limited Web connections. Many of these services remain in the experimental stage.

* WebTV—Introduced in late 1996, WebTV (http://www.webtv.net/) provides Web and E-mail access through ordinary television sets. The connection is made through a custom high-speed modem. You must purchase a special set-top unit for your TV, plus subscribe to the connection service. Recently, similar systems by other manufacturers have appeared on the market to compete with WebTV.
Locating Internet Access Providers

If you already have Internet access but wish to learn about other access providers, go to TAG Online (http://www.tagsys.com/Provider/provider_search.html) or Mecklermedia's "The List" (http://www.thelist.com/), where you will be able to search databases of U.S. and international access providers by name, geographic location and area code.

If you do not already have Internet access, you can learn about Internet services that are available in your area by contacting your local library or telephone company for recommendations, or by consulting a local computer publication or computer store.

What to Look for in an Access Provider

Access providers vary widely in the services and capabilities they offer. The providers listed at the beginning of this chapter offer local access throughout most of the United States; however, you might find that a smaller, local provider is more suited to your needs.

Before committing to a service of any kind, be aware of the following variables:

* Fee plan—Providers may offer a flat monthly fee for unlimited access, a metered hourly fee, or both. The fee that will be most reasonable for you depends on how much time you plan to spend online. If you are online for more than five hours per month, a flat monthly fee will be the most economical choice. Otherwise, you'll be paying for service you don't need.
* Start-up fees—Some providers charge a fee for setting up new accounts that can range from a few dollars to $100. Providers may also charge "hidden" fees and premium rates for access at certain times. Ask for a breakdown of all fees charged before you sign on.
* Local access numbers—Unless you can dial in from your local area, you'll be paying long distance charges for each Internet session. Make sure a provider offers access numbers for your area, as well as for any area to which you routinely travel.
* Contracts—You may be offered a yearly or multi-year contract for service in exchange for a discount rate. However, if you
cancel your account before the contract is up, the provider might charge you a penalty. Also, make sure that your service provider is stable and reliable before committing to a long-term agreement, particularly if you are required to pay up front.

* Dependable access—The ability to establish a connection during peak hours has become an important issue as more people go online. A good service provider, obviously, should have few busy signals and minimal downtime.

* Good customer support—If you call with a question concerning your account at an odd hour, will your call be taken? Will your E-mail queries be answered? The major providers usually have excellent customer support, but smaller outfits may offer little or no support services. Also be alert to premiums charged for support calls.

* Proprietary services—America Online, Prodigy and CompuServe all have their own databases, conference centers and chat rooms not available on the Internet or any other service. Other service providers offer nothing more than a straight connection to the Internet.

* Restricted access—Providers can often determine what Internet services they will provide. For example, some will carry only selected newsgroups. Providers that lack such restrictions often advertise their "uncensored" and "unrestricted" access.