



Many methods to get Internet access

So you've been hearing a lot about the Internet and its World Wide Web, and perhaps some of your friends are "on the Web" right now.

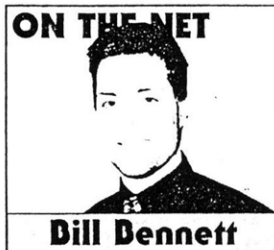
What does getting connected involve, and who do you call? Hopefully, this month's column will help you get started.

There are roughly 40,000 separate, autonomous networks that are connected together via the Internet. Connected to these smaller networks are thousands of desktop computers, and a variety of access points. If you have one of these computers (perhaps at work), then you may find it easy to get to the Internet.

MOST PEOPLE will require the services of an Internet access company, called an Internet Service Provider (ISP).

An ISP has banks of modems (dozens to hundreds), each connected to a standard telephone line at one end, and to the Internet at the other (via a series of computers, routers and sub-networks). Sometimes housed in the local phone company's central office (CO), the ISP also could be located in a small office building.

Being a quality ISP takes more



than state-of-the-art hardware. It requires excellent customer service. Besides providing dial-up access, better ISPs will provide connection software, and a Web browser, both free.

Most ISPs offer full Web access these days, as well as access to Usenet. Usenet comprises about 10,000 different multi-threaded collaborative email groups, organized by topic, where each letter sent to a particular Usenet group is seen by everyone else accessing that group.

USENET GROUPS are great for sharing ideas and experiences with people around the world, based on specific topics.

Here are some things to consider when selecting an ISP:

- Make sure they have enough modems to handle peak loads. Busy signals are common among some smaller ISPs, but better quality ones (especially national providers) use a ratio of 10:1 or better (1 modem for every 10 customers).

- Once connected, you can still be delayed if their "pipeline" to the Internet goes through too many other providers — one or two intermediary "hops" to the Internet backbone should be the

maximum. After that, routing and limited-bandwidth issues will slow things down too much. There is no easy formula here, as the ISP's bandwidth should be based on their number of modems. And even if your ISP has a fast pipe to their ISP (and then to the Internet backbone), if that intermediate ISP's pipe gets bogged down or goes out, your going to be inconvenienced.

- Make sure their modems are fast enough. The slowest I would use are 28,800 and 33,600 bits-per-second (bps). In a couple of months, 56,000 bps modem will be introduced. Note that you will not always be able to connect at these speeds, due to noisy phone lines.

OTHER THINGS to consider: If you need mission critical access, check to see if the ISP's link to the Internet has a redundant backup.

Do they have a UPS (Uninterruptible Power Supply) in case of power failure? Do they have on-site technical staff 24 hours a day to fix problems (pagers are nice, but it takes time to get techs back to the office in a snow storm). Do they take credit cards for billing, or do you have to send a check each month?

This is a new industry, so there is not always a track record to suggest past service. Small is not necessarily bad — sometimes smaller ISPs offer superior service. Some ISPs provide money-back guarantees. Word of mouth is often best.

In March 1996, there were about 1,400 ISPs in the United States. In late summer, the number of ISPs in North America grew to about 2,200. As of last month, North American estimates grew to

slightly over 3,000 — the vast majority in the United States. This means you have options.

You can get your Internet dial-up service from any of a number of providers. On a more national level, there are companies such as

AT&T Worldnet (1-800-Worldnet) and Ameritech.net (1-800-638-8775).

Locally, there are companies such as Heritage On-Line (1-888-504-7660) and I-Link International,

See *INTERNET* — Page 39

Internet

Continued from Page 18

Inc. (676-7344).

Most charge between \$20 and \$30 per month for unlimited Internet access, and offer less-expensive plans for those of you who don't

"surf" as much.

WHETHER YOU decide to go with a large or small provider, keep in mind that if you become dissatisfied and opt to switch to another provider, your email address will change.

This is much like moving and changing your telephone number, except most ISPs do not provide a

message indicating that there is a new "forwarding" address. Usually, once you change your address, the old one is completely disabled.

We'll see you on the Net!
Bill Bennett is president of Bennett-Ross, Inc. Internet Solutions of Trenton. He receives e mail via the Internet at bill@bennett-ross.com.