

Say goodbye to email as Barry Fox looks at the **next wave of options** in communications.

# The V-Mail of the species



Faxing took off when Britain's postmen went on strike. The Japanese had already developed Group 3 standard machines because telex couldn't carry the pictorial characters of the Japanese alphabet. NEC, Canon, Sharp and the rest

steamed in with ads like 'Our machines never strike'. Joe Public is now learning how much cheaper and more convenient it is to send and receive email with the option to delete, store, forward or reply without printing, and without the need to leave a PC with its fax modem running 24 hours a day.

**By early December** last year, half a million people got free access via Dixons FreeServe, and apart from the cost of the helpline, no-one has discovered a big catch. Yes, FreeServe disables other ISP connections, but it's ideal for the newbies it was intended for. Though FreeServe offers ISDN dial-up I'm the only one in the half million to try and use the Ignition ISDN terminal adaptor which BT sells for its ISDN lines. Thinking of trying? Forget it. After more tech calls than I care to remember, we now know that although MSN works with either the V120 or PPP protocols, Planet/FreeServe's routers only work with PPP and the Ignition defaults to V120. The Ignition's PPP setting won't work, either. There's a software fix for the Ignition (from a Bulletin Board on 01293 610610) but I've lost interest because CompuServe only works with V120. With FreeServe's free lunch to compete with, CompuServe and AOL must work harder to entice newbies with free trial offers.

➔ **Many thanks to readers** who've told of their CompuServe problem which leaves new subscribers with predictable numbers exposed to phoney 'Account Manager' requests for their password and banking details. This has clearly been going on for a long time and, to my knowledge, CompuServe has taken no action in giving newbies a big red warning. CompuServe's MD, Martin Turner, was still saying nothing until he heard I'd approached his European boss and parent company AOL. Suddenly, CompuServe wants me to know my 'concerns regarding fraud are being treated as a priority'. It's too little, too late, and the

experience has left me with zero confidence in CompuServe, and not much in AOL.

➔ **Microsoft's Hotmail** looks interesting, but setting it up involves an obstacle course of 'What POP' questions. Click the Help link, says the screen. There wasn't one. The next sea change will come with simple and probably free email services from digital terrestrial and satellite receivers. The Sky box has a built-in 28.8K modem and will soon offer a free internet mail address. The On Digital box has only a 14.4K modem but can connect by standard serial port to any external modem. Comdex in Las Vegas saw the launch of V-Mail, a simple \$99 system from Philips to send video messages by email. 'V-Mail will replace email in four or five years,' predicts Hugh Brogan, CEO of Philips PC Peripherals Division. The Philips camera (USB and Windows 98 only) comes with software called Videogram Creator which lets the user click Send to compress the conventional AVI (Video for Windows format file) recording by a factor of 100, so a one-minute sound and video message can be stored on a standard 1.4Mb floppy.

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**V-Mail bundles** matching Player software with the message and packages it as an executable (EXE) file. The recipient clicks on the message, which unpacks itself and plays sound and pictures. The player software works with any version of Windows (3.x, 95, 98, NT or OS/2) and runs on old 486 processors. Even the two American techies demonstrating V-Mail failed to see the systems' cleverness. They were sending their messages in AVI format, with a Readme file to tell the unfortunate recipient how to decode them! But there are still two fatal flaws. A V-Mail takes megabytes to convey a message that could travel as a kilobyte of text. This takes time on-line, overloads the carrier system and soaks up disc space. And who, in these days of viruses, dares click on an EXE file received from an unknown source?

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