



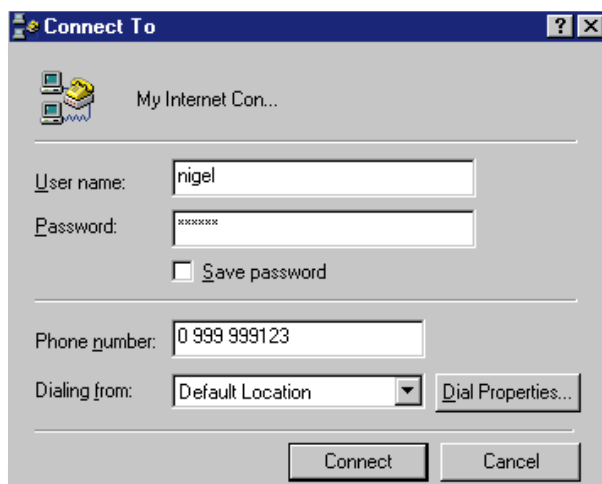
Community centre

Nigel Whitfield looks beyond the web at how you can gain from personal participation.

Generally, when people talk about the net, for many of them it's simply the world wide web and perhaps email, together with the spam they receive in their mailbox. Experienced hands will know that there's much more to the internet than just the glossy multimedia bits, others may be missing out on more than they imagined.

The discussion forums on the internet are actually one of the most useful things it offers. They're not populated exclusively by the sad and the lonely as a recent late night caller to a radio station phone-in suggested — did anyone else spot the irony in this? You'll find all sorts of people talking about a wide variety of topics in the discussion groups of Usenet, on IRC channels and via email. When you hear about this in the media it's mostly the odd or the saintly: people who marry after chatting online, or someone across the other side of the world who alerts the emergency services when a regular chat partner doesn't respond.

There's more mundane stuff, too: people sharing their hints and tips, exchanging information and support. There are HIV-positive sufferers swapping information about the side effects of drugs, survivors of abuse, OS/2 users and people like the PCW reader who



◀Fig 2 YOU CAN SAVE YOUR INTERNET PASSWORD BY LOGGING INTO WINDOWS WITH A VALID NAME AND PASSWORD

simplest way to make a community of your own is to use email.

Mailing lists are something we've covered before here, and while some

touchingly wrote to tell us how contacts on the net have probably helped save their child's life.

If you can't find a community that feels right for you amongst the many thousands out there, you can create one yourself. Whether it's a real-time chat on IRC, a discussion on Usenet, or something more immediate via email, why not make your own space? Invite friends, or others with common interests, or talk about it on a web page and wait for people to come and join in.

You might want a social group, or some sort of support forum, or perhaps somewhere to exchange technical information between co-workers or with the net at large, or maybe it's just a convenient way to organise all your friends when you want a night out

together. Each of the different types of forum you can create has different rules, and some, like IRC or Usenet, will need appropriate programs on your computer. The

people think they're cumbersome and obsolete, I'd disagree: what could be simpler than providing people with a URL where they can take part, with a single address that distributes a message to all within minutes. Of course, there can be drawbacks and you're likely to have to undertake more administrative work than with other types of forum but if you want to get going quickly and easily, they can't be beaten.

If you don't want to create a mailing list, there are plenty around that might well cover some of the topics in which you're interested. Mailing list servers like one1ist.com <www.one1ist.com> [Fig 1] provide a searchable directory of the lists they provide and, if you visit a search engine like Yahoo, you'll turn up plenty of mailing lists on a whole range of topics.

But if you want to create a list of your own, what do you do? You can create a simple list in some email programs, though you'll usually have to process subscriptions and removals yourself, which can be a nuisance for a large list. Or you can download software to your PC, which will give you a lot of control at the cost of a large phone bill if you want people to be able to have timely discussions. Or, you can use one of the professional list hosting services on the internet.

Some commercial ISPs, such as Direct Connection <www.dircon.net> will host a list for you although the busier it becomes the more you'll have to pay. If you want to experiment, however, you



◀Fig 1 SITES SUCH AS ONE1IST ALLOW YOU TO CREATE A DISCUSSION FORUM OF YOUR OWN, QUICKLY AND EASILY



Questions & answers

Q I am having problems with a form on my site. I am using the action `mailto:user@somesite.com` and the method 'post'. When I try to submit the form, my computer launches my turnpike email program but does not enter any of the information into the form. If I use the method 'get', the same happens but this time the information is included but after the address in the address box.

a Unfortunately, you're not likely to get anywhere using the `mailto` action on your form. It works differently on different browsers — on many, it simply doesn't work at all. To process forms reliably, regardless of which web browser people are using, you need a script on your

web server to submit the data. *This is probably one of the most commonly asked questions, and I'll come back to it in more detail next month with full details of how to do this with some of the most popular internet providers. In the meantime, you need to contact the person hosting your web site and ask them what scripts they have available for you to use.*

Q When I connect to my ISP I have to enter my account password at the 'connect to' screen [Fig 2]. The screen contains a 'save password' box which I assume, when active, allows the password to be saved for further connections thus removing the need to continue to type it in. However, the save password box never seems to become active. How can I make the

box active and save having to keep typing in my ISP user password?

a To make the Save Password box active, you need to be logged onto Windows with a valid user name and password or to have disabled the passwords when you log into Windows. Delete the Password List files (for example `nigel.pwl`) from your Windows directories if you can't remember the passwords you used. Entering no user name or password for Windows will automatically disable the request at startup and you'll still be able to save your internet password.

Q On a web site button bar, I'm using a sort of oval shape in a rectangle. The background of the image is black, like my web page, so it looks like a

normal button but the hyperlink box surrounds the button with a blue rectangle. How can I get rid of them?

a This is a simple problem to fix. You need to edit the HTML and add `BORDER=0` to the HTML code for the image. For example:

```
<A HREF="http://www.mysite.com/"><IMG SRC="gifs/button1.gif" BORDER=0></A>
```

Depending on the web editor you're using, you may be able to set the border attribute by right clicking on the image and selecting its properties. Incidentally, if you wanted a thicker border you could use a higher number and the colour will be the same as the link colour specified for the whole page.

can start out for nothing using a free list service such as One1ist, mentioned above.

It is surprisingly simple to create a list on One1ist; you need to fill in a registration form, giving a few details about yourself, then you can decide what type of list you want — its name, whether anyone can post or, if you have to approve messages, what age group it's suitable for and what language should be used. Then click a button and you have a brand new discussion forum, waiting for people to be added.

■ A list for PCW readers

I've set up a list called [pcw-internet](mailto:pcw-internet-subscribe@onelist.com), where readers of this column can

exchange information with each other. It took around five minutes, and all you need to do to join is send an email to pcw-internet-subscribe@onelist.com, or visit www.onelist.com/subscribe.cgi/pcw-internet.

However, creating the list is only half the work — unless you have a list of people to add to it already. Fortunately, One1ist has a lot of useful information to tell you how to promote your list but even if you don't use their service it's worth looking at. There is, of course, no such thing as a free lunch and you'll see three line ads tacked on to the bottom of messages sent via your list. You can avoid those for around US\$5 per month.

If you are still unsure about the benefits of online communities such as this, why not dip a toe in the water by joining someone else's list — even our PCW one if you like — to see how easy it can be to participate. If you still confine most of your net usage to looking at web



sites and sending personal emails, you will find it a

surprisingly simple step into a wider and more interactive internet world.

▲ A MAILING LIST REQUIRES SOME WORK TO MANAGE BUT WITH A MODERN WEB-BASED SYSTEM, IT'S EASIER THAN YOU THINK

PCW internet list

➔ To join other readers of this column in discussions and see first hand how a mailing list works, send an email to pcw-internet-subscribe@onelist.com, or visit www.onelist.com/subscribe.cgi/pcw-internet.

PCW CONTACTS

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