

## Caught in the Net

by Craig Savage



If you haven't read or heard about the Internet, then you probably think OJ stands for Orange Juice. If you *have* heard about it, you probably know just enough to be confused about what it is and what it can do for your construction business. This beginner's guide to surfing the Net will help to keep you afloat.

### What is the Internet?

The Internet is a network of networks that has been cobbled together to link up computers all over the world. The Defense Department, defense manufacturers, and major universities have been exchanging research and correspondence electronically over the Net for several years. Today, businesses of all sizes, and individuals using personal

computers at home, are using the Net for all kinds of commerce, entertainment, and information transfer.

There are many ways to communicate on the Net using computers. Sending and receiving plain text files and e-mail has, until recently, been the norm. Other text-based vehicles include news groups ("subscribers" receive daily or weekly update messages), chat groups (online discussion in a specific topic area), and software "downloads" (transferring files from a remote computer).

As computer hardware has grown more sophisticated, the Net has increasingly been used to move graphics and sounds as well as text. The growth in this "multimedia" capability accounts for the explosion of interest in a part of

the Net, and has given rise to the part of the net that will be of most interest to contractors: the World Wide Web (WWW or, simply, the Web). There are over 50,000 specific addresses, or "Web sites," and more than 5,000 are added each month.

**Getting connected.** You can get on the Internet several ways. For about \$10 a month (which usually buys at least five hours of connect time), you can use a commercial information service like Prodigy, CompuServe, or America Online. You can also hook your computer directly into the Net through an Internet Provider (IP). About \$25 a month buys unlimited time on the Net. If you want to use the Web, make sure to ask for a SLIP/PPP account when signing up with an IP.

To take full advantage of all that the Internet has to offer, you will need to use a 14.4 bps modem; 28.8 is better if you can afford it and the provider supports it.

Once you have established a telephone connection to the Net, you will need software. For Mac users, I suggest Internet Tour Guide by Michael Frasee (Ventana Press; 919/942-0220). It has everything you need to get "logged on" to the Net from your computer. For Windows users, I recommend Internet In A Box (Spry; 800/557-9614).

## Construction URLs on the Web

This is a partial list of URLs (Universal Resource Locators) found during a two-hour hopscotch tour of the Web:

### The Construction Site

<http://www.argiope.com/construction/>

### Dallas Construction Home Page

<http://www.onramp.net/hbarker/dalcon/dalcon.html>

### State of California - Contractor's State License Board

<http://www.ca.gov/cslb/aprs6.html>

### AEC InfoCenter: Architecture, Engineering, Building Construction

<http://www.inforamp.net/~aec/>

### The Advant Home

<http://www.sccsi.com/advant/advant3.html>

### WorldCAD Access

<http://www.awa.com/nct/software/cadvisor.html>

### CADvisory Newsletter

<http://www.awa.com/nct/software/cadvisor.html>

### WireNet Home Page

<http://www.deltanet.com/wirenet/wire-net.htm>

### WoodWeb Home Page

<http://www.epix.net/homepage/woodweb/woodweb.html>

### Powell's Technical Books

<http://www.technical.powells.portland.or.us/welcome.html>

### New Homes Online

<http://newhomes.com/>

### A Consumer's Guide to Home Improvement Contractor Law

<http://www.consumer.com/consumer/homecon.html>

### BuildCom Home Page

<http://www.build.com/>

### Untangling the Net

With your provider paid, the software loaded, and your Internet ID, passwords, and addresses entered, you are ready to "jack into" the Net. The network access software listed above contains a piece of software called a "browser" — the most popular is Netscape — which you can use to tour the Web.

**A View of the Netscape.** When you launch Netscape, you are first taken to the Netscape "home page" — a kind of table of contents. Netscape's home page has graphic "buttons" linked to other pages and to other Web sites. When you click on a button or on highlighted text (called "hypertext"), you "jump" to the location linked to that button or word. That's the exciting part of the Web — the ability to hop from site to site anywhere in the world, driven only by your imagination and need to know.

## What's Out There Now?

For this article, I spent a measured two hours hopscotching around the Web to see what construction topics I could come up with (see "Construction URLs,").

At the Netscape search window, the search engine, called Yahoo, found 15 occurrences, or "hits," of the keyword "construction" among the thousands of Web site descriptions available. To go directly to a given site, I simply clicked on its name, which appears as a URL (universal resources locator). The first URL was <http://www.build.com>, a Web site called BuildCom. Created for builders, designers, and home improvement professionals, it contains an index of construction information, such as product literature, construction associations and periodicals, and dozens of other construction information databases.

Next, I went to AEC InfoNet, another compendium of Architectural, Engineering, and Construction information. Their home page had a section titled "Other sites of interest," which led me to the home pages of the California State License Board, World CAD, Wood Web, The Construction Site, and others.

Each of these sites had different construction information to offer. For instance, the Dallas Construction home page had a directory of Texas contractors, a listing of homes for sale, and a place to sign up to list your own company. A site called Powell's Technical Books offered thousands of construction-related book titles for sale.

The list of sites I found in two hours is a lot longer than the one shown here. The biggest problem with the Web is that there is so much information that finding what you need is time consuming — but not boring.

**Does it pay to surf?** Will the Net help your business, or is it just the latest form of entertainment that you have no time for? Right this minute, the Net is best suited for research and occasional gee-whiz info-tainment. But the net is changing daily. Here is how I see it helping contractors work in the future — perhaps within just six months.

A designer or builder logs onto the Net and jumps to his favorite Web site, then jumps to, say, Grohe's home page,

where he locates the exact fixture he needs for a design he's working on. He'll download a cut sheet of the product with drawings he can cut and paste onto his own drawings, and perhaps with specifications he can cut and paste into his spec book. By typing in his zip code, he'll get a list of local providers and, using their URL, can jump directly to their home pages to get their price lists.

Next, he e-mails the completed design to his clients, who view it the next time they connect to the Net. They jump to the WoodWeb home page, where they get estimates from two woodworkers bidding from the online plans for special solid-wood cabinets. They electronically "sign" the contract they receive on the Net, and send it back with a secure digital cash down payment that is deposited directly into the cabinetmaker's escrow account.

The designer's estimator logs onto the Net and sends out requests for proposals (RFPs) through Commerce Net, and receives answers within minutes about products and prices. Using data from distributors, suppliers, and the manufacturers themselves, he can complete the estimate in hours, not days. The contractor then uses the Net to look for subcontractors and pick suppliers. Since the designer has included URLs of all the suppliers he used for his estimates, the contractor can use them as e-mail addresses for his own RFPs. When the contractor receives a response from companies he has never heard of, he jumps to their home pages, where there are photos and movies of their latest projects, testimonials from satisfied clients, and even buttons to e-mail requests for more information from clients. After making his choices, the subcontracts are agreed upon, and digitally signed and exchanged, all on the Net.

The Internet is poised to change forever the way builders do business. All of the transactions between a client and a contractor, and between a contractor and his subs, job site, vendors, suppliers, utilities, and banks, will be made over the Net. Most of it can happen now: It's just waiting for you to log on. ■

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