

Getting Started With E-Mail

by Joe Stoddard

Sooner or later, a client is going to ask: "What's your e-mail address"? When that dreaded moment arrives, will you give them your son or daughter's address, or will you finally come up with an e-mail strategy that doesn't include your 12-year-old?

What Is E-Mail?

Electronic mail, or "e-mail," is a way for people to communicate with each other using their computers. You can type a message just like you were typing a letter, but instead of printing it out and mailing it in a stamped envelope, you send it over the phone line.

There are lots of advantages to this kind of communication. You can send one message to several people at the same time — to keep, say, a group of subcontractors up to date about a job. And you can electronically "attach" other computer files — a contract document, for instance, or digital photographs and drawings.

While e-mail can streamline your communications with clients, subs, and suppliers, to be useful it takes a little preparation and the right tools. To send and receive e-mail from your home or office computer, you'll need a modem, an account with an Internet Service Provider (ISP), and an e-mail "client" — computer-speak for the software you use to read, send, and organize your e-mail.

Modems

Most desktop computers and many laptops now come equipped with a built-in (internal) modem which will connect the computer to the phone system. If your desktop computer doesn't have an internal modem, use an exter-

nal unit instead, which is much easier to install and can be moved from computer to computer. For notebook computers, the solution is a credit-card sized PC-card modem (see Figure 1). If you want to send faxes directly from your computer, spend a few more bucks for a "fax/modem," some of which also handle voice communications.



Figure 1. Some PC-card modems made for notebook computers require a cabled adapter that can be easily lost or damaged. Instead, use a type where the phone cord plugs directly into an X-jack on the card, such as the 3-Com/U.S. Robotics modem shown here.

Choosing an ISP

You'll also need what is known as a "dial-up" account from an ISP. The hard part is deciding which company to sign up with. Most new PCs are pre-loaded with software from national services like AOL, AT&T, Earthlink, and Mindspring, all of which can provide an e-mail account and connect to the Internet. But because none of them covers every phone exchange, your best bet is one of the more than 1,000 regional and local providers that can provide a *local* phone

number. You can check the Yellow Pages, but the best source for these companies is the Internet itself. Since you're not online yet, borrow a friend's computer for a few minutes or go to the library and have someone help you find *www.the list.com*, a searchable online directory of every ISP in the United States.

For about \$20 per month, you should be able to sign up for unlimited connection time, although many providers also offer limited service for less money — for example, \$7 for 7 hours, with \$2 for each additional hour. Also check out the ISP's reputation for fast, reliable service. Many companies, including some of the national giants, have been overtaken by growth recently, leaving users with endless busy signals. Ask around, and you'll find out who's good and who isn't in your area.

Free ISPs. For the frugal among you, there are free or cheap e-mail services. For example, basic service from Juno (*www.juno.com*) is free, and for about \$35 per year for Juno Gold you can add file attachments. On the minus side, Juno's interface is peppered with advertising banners that chew up screen space and can be distracting (Figure 2).

Choosing an e-mail address. When you sign up for your ISP account, you'll be asked to choose a user name and password. The name you pick, followed by the name of your service provider, will become your e-mail address. For instance, in the e-mail address *john doe@isp.net*, "johndoe" is the user name, and "isp.net" is the provider. Choose your user name wisely. You'll be publishing your e-mail address on business cards and other promotional material, and you need people to associate it with

Figure 2. Free e-mail services like Juno are supported by companies whose advertising banners are a standard part of the screen users see when reading or writing messages. Customers may also mistake your messages for “junk e-mail,” much of which originates at free sites.

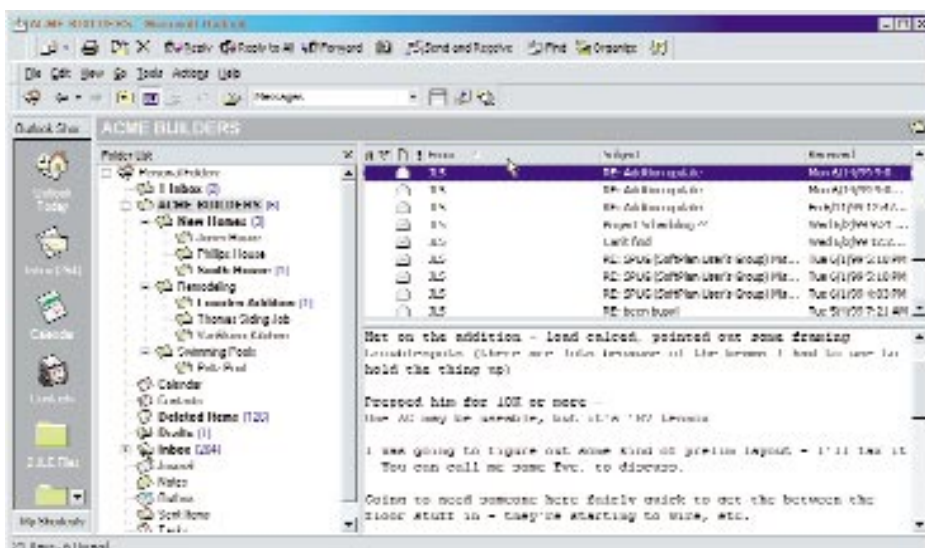


Figure 3. To be useful, e-mail software should provide an easy way to sort messages. In Microsoft Outlook, for example, clicking on the “From” column in the message area title bar sorts messages by sender. The software can also sort by “Subject” or the date messages were “Received.” Outlook also allows you to store messages in “nested” folders, making it easy to organize e-mail by job (left side of screen).

you personally. For that reason stay away from cute user names like “gonefishin” or “hounddog,” and keep it professional, using some version of your name or your company name. Your fishing buddies might know who “gonefishin” is, but a client trying to contact you for a new home won’t.

Selecting E-Mail Software

Good software is critical to organizing the e-mail you send and receive. Here are some features to look for:

- **Multiple file attachments.** You may want to send a client several types of

information at one time — a drawing, a proposal, and a link to a favorite Web site. Not all e-mail software can do this.

- **Nested folders.** Like other computer documents, e-mail is stored in “folders” you create. You should be able to “nest” folders — that is, put folders inside of other folders — and name them whatever you want.
- **Message sorting.** Imagine that you had a big pile of paper letters on your desk, but you could magically move them into smaller piles based on what was inside without ever opening them. E-mail software does this for

you, but some sorting routines are better than others (Figure 3).

- **Mail groups.** In the address book, you should be able to create a single entry that contains several related recipients. For example, if you created a group called “Smith job subs,” you could send a message to all of the subs in the group by typing the group name in the address field of the message.
- **BCC: field.** Individuals or groups placed in the “blind carbon copy” (BCC:) address field of your e-mail message will not be able to see the names or addresses of other recipients of the same message. This is an important feature if you don’t want subs to know who else is bidding on your job, or if you want to protect the privacy of your clients by not making their e-mail addresses public without their permission.
- **Rules and filters.** Eventually, you will start to receive messages you don’t want from people you don’t know, including advertisements for pornography, “get rich quick” schemes, and chain letters. While it’s nearly impossible to stop this so-called “spam” from filling your inbox, a good e-mail program will provide “rules” and “filters” that can be set up to send most junk e-mail directly to the electronic trash can without your having to look at it.
- **Import/Export.** At a minimum, e-mail software should import and export address book entries to and from contact management software such as Symantec’s ACT or a handheld computing device such as the Palm Pilot.


What about AOL? Many first-time Internet users choose America Online as their service provider, with good reason: AOL covers a good bit of the country with local phone numbers and is easy to install and connect to. But AOL’s proprietary interface is not well-suited to business e-mail. For instance, AOL can send e-mail with multiple file attachments, but the person who receives the message may not be able to read the files unless he or she is also

a member of AOL. But my biggest gripe with AOL is the way messages are sorted and stored. You can set up folders for individual subjects, but AOL doesn't let you easily nest folders, and doesn't offer any way to sort messages other than clicking each one to open it individually.

AOL is a good service for families, offering diverse content and safeguards for children, but business users will find it limiting. Use AOL for your primary e-mail only if no other local dial-up choices exist in your area.

Finding e-mail software. Many capable e-mail software packages are available at low or no cost. *Outlook Express* comes free with Microsoft's Internet Explorer Web browser and can be downloaded from www.microsoft.com. Microsoft *Outlook 2000* combines contact management with e-mail, and is included as part of the popular Office Suite, or as a stand-alone for under \$100.

Messenger is part of the Netscape Communicator Suite and can also be downloaded for free from www.netscape.com. QualComm's *Eudora* can

be downloaded from www.eudora.com (the Lite version is free; the Pro version is currently \$39). Additionally, the giant download sites at CNET (www.download.com) and Strouds (<http://cws.internet.com>) offer these products and many others, often with review ratings from the site editors. 

Joe Stoddard is a contributing editor to the *Journal of Light Construction*, specializing in computer technology.