

**Berg Kaprow Lewis**

Going online

Connecting to the Internet can vastly improve your business's communication with the outside world. Every firm, however small, should consider using email at the very least. And there is a mass of invaluable business information freely available through the Internet.

This briefing covers:

- What you can achieve by going online.
- Getting the right connection.
- Avoiding the pitfalls.

1 The benefits

1.1 Email enables you to **send messages** to any other user connected to the Internet. Email is essential for almost every business, as your customers will expect to use email to communicate with you. It offers several benefits.

- Sending documents such as letters, spreadsheets and pictures by email is usually fast and straightforward.
- You can send email to multiple recipients. This is cost-effective for marketing campaigns, technical updates, product launches and price-change announcements.
- Email is less intrusive than the telephone, as the person receiving an email does not have to read the message immediately.
- Email messages can easily be kept for future reference.
- Email is cheap. Your main expense is the cost of connection to the Internet. You will probably have to pay an Internet service provider to provide this connection.

See Email.

1.2 You can find **useful information** on the Internet.

- You can discreetly research your customers and competitors by looking at their websites.
- Many detailed market reports are available online although you may have to pay for these.
- You can find new suppliers and compare them with existing ones by checking their websites.
- Online credit-checking services can provide instant results when assessing credit limits for new customers.
- You can find details of grants and loans.
- You can keep up with the latest developments in your sector through specialist websites and news services.

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See **Useful Internet sites** and **Finding information on the Internet**.

1.3 You can improve your **internal communication**, particularly if you have people working in more than one location.

- Simple issues can be communicated to employees via email or an internal website.
- Employees who work at home or out of the office can access your systems. For example, they can use your customer database or save their work on your server.

See **Intranets**.

1.4 External communication can be streamlined.

- You can create and manage a website for your company that can be used as a shop window for your business. See **Your website strategy**.
- Marketing by email is fast and inexpensive.
- You can allow customers access to certain areas of your system. For example, an architect may allow selected clients to view plans held directly on the architect's system. This can save time as well as transport or delivery costs.
- You can use online banking facilities. Some banks set lower charges for accounts managed online.
- If your suppliers offer online services, you may find it quicker (and sometimes cheaper) to order through their websites or via email.

Domain names

To create a professional impression, you will probably want to operate under your own unique name, known as a 'domain name'.

- This can be used as the address of your website and as part of your business email address. Using a domain name means that your website and email addresses don't have to include your Internet service provider's name.
- To register a domain name, visit Nominet (www.nominet.org.uk) or ask your Internet service provider.
- The all-in cost can be as little as £20 for two years.

See **Your website strategy**.

Carefully consider security if you are going to open up your systems across the Internet. See **Security and the Internet**.

2 Planning

You need three key components to go online: a computer, software to manage your online activities and a physical connection to the Internet. Plan each of these elements with your required usage in mind.

2.1 Nearly all **computers** in day-to-day use are capable of managing simple online functions.

- Faster computers and bigger graphics cards will process and display information more quickly. If your use will be occasional, there is little need for the latest PC. The more you will use it and the more important speed becomes to you, the more you will have to invest in your system. See **Specifying and purchasing IT**.
- You may need additional equipment to connect to the Internet. The type of equipment will depend on your connection method (see **3**).

2.2 You will need **software** to control your online activities.

- The Windows operating system contains all the software you need to physically connect to the Internet.
- You will need a browser to access websites. Internet Explorer (which comes with Windows) and Netscape Navigator are the most common choices. Both are free and can also handle email.
- To use email, you will need email software. Decide how many people you want to use your email software, as this will define which is the best package for you.

For individuals, you could use Outlook Express, which comes with Windows. There are alternatives, some of which are free and some you will have to pay for.

If you want more than five people to have email, you should consider a software package designed for group use. Examples include Microsoft Exchange, a package that stores email on your server and allows you to share resources.

► Directors' Briefing titles are available on **Email, Finding information on the Internet, Your website strategy, Designing your website, Marketing on the Internet, and Trading on the Internet**.

- If you want to use specific online services, check your software will be compatible. For example, check your bank's requirements for its online banking service.

2.3 The type of **connection** you choose is essential for efficiency and cost.

- There are five different ways to connect to the Internet (see 3). Each has benefits and drawbacks, so planning for the future and getting the right connection first time is important.
- Think about what you want to do and how you want to do it. Ask yourself: How many people will be accessing the Internet at the same time?

Do your computers need independent connections or could they share a single line?

Would you use the Internet enough to qualify as a heavy-duty user?

Do you need to be online nearly all the time?

Do you need to move large files, video or big images?

The answers to these questions will define which of the connection methods is best for you and if you will need to buy additional equipment.

3 Getting connected

3.1 The simplest option is to connect through your **telephone line**.

- This method of connection is suitable for simple email, Internet browsing and limited file transfer for a small number of users.
- There may be delays if several people attempt to share one line or one modem or you are trying to transfer anything other than small amounts of information.
- The maximum speed for data transfer is usually around 40Kb per second.
- You cannot use the line for voice calls while you are connected to the Internet.
- If your usage will be light, this will probably be the most cost-effective method of connection. Most Internet service providers offer a 'pay-as-you-go' service, so you are charged for a local-rate call all the time you are online. Or you can buy unlimited access for a set monthly fee (between £10 and £20) if you want to spend more time online.

- You will need to buy a modem to connect if one is not already built in to your computer. Buy the fastest modem — certainly not one that offers less than 56Kb speed.

3.2 Superseding ISDN connections, **ADSL** or **broadband** is now the fastest and most cost-effective way of communicating.

- The connections are always on — there is no need to dial. Voice calls can be carried through the same line simultaneously.
- Charges are fixed, usually on a monthly basis, although you can make a saving by paying up-front annually.
- Service availability can be restricted by your proximity to the local telephone exchange and whether the exchange has been modified to accept broadband connections.
- A range of data transfer speeds — with different pricing — options are available.
- ADSL capability is shared across a number of users, measured as a 'contention ratio'. The lower the connection ratio, the higher the speed will be.

3.3 ISDN2 is a high-quality digital link, using the existing phone wires. It effectively gives you two high-capacity digital lines.

- The larger, more powerful ISDN30 will probably be more economical if you need more than, say, eight lines.

3.4 If you have a large number of users and need to move lots of information around your network, you may consider a **leased line**.

- A leased line is a direct connection to the Internet using special cabling that your company exclusively uses.
- Leased lines are the oldest and most reliable forms of permanent connection to the Internet.
- Speeds range from 64Kb to more than 1,500Kb per second. Faster connections are more expensive.
- Leased lines are the most costly options, with charges up to £1,400 per month.

4 The final choice

Once you have settled on the best connection method for your business, in most cases you will need to choose an Internet service provider. There are a variety of providers, though not all offer every different kind of connection. Shop around for the best deal.

4.1 Some Internet service providers are **specifically designed** for business users.

“Almost every ISP will let you have 30 days' free trial. The only snag about trying two or three of them is the need to change your email address every time. However, you can get round that easily. Companies such as Hotmail, Bigfoot, Excite and others will all give you free email addresses which don't change even if you switch ISPs.”

Marcus Williamson, Connectotel

- These services are generally the most reliable. This is important if you want to set up a company website. Your reputation may suffer if visitors cannot access your site quickly and easily.
- Some packages give you a free domain name and up to 20Mb of space to set up a site.

4.2 If all you require is an email account and occasional Internet access, connect to a **pay-as-you-go** service.

Although these services are mainly targeted at consumers, many small businesses use them.

- There is usually no guarantee that these services will always function smoothly. If the connection fails, or the Internet service provider goes bust, you may find there is nothing you can do.

See Internet service providers.

5 Avoiding pitfalls

Once you are online, manage your system to make sure the connection to the outside world isn't abused.

5.1 Control **access** to your network to ensure outside hackers cannot get into your system.

- Fit a firewall — a set of barriers and filters that stop other Internet users accessing files on your network without your knowledge or permission. These can be hardware or software-based.

See Security and the Internet.

5.3 The Internet is not regulated and contains **viruses** — more than 42,000 at the last count. While most viruses are harmless, some can damage files and destroy information on your computer or network.

- A virus can be attached to any file, particularly programs and word-processing documents. Make sure that your network server and desktop computers are running up-to-date anti-virus software.
- The main distribution route for viruses is sending them as attachments to emails. All attachments from unfamiliar sources should be handled with care, including spreadsheet files.
- Viruses can be contracted when

downloading programs from websites.

- Make sure you have a strong virus checker that runs continuously in the background to monitor your network for virus attacks.
- Your virus checker will probably allow you to download regular updates from the manufacturer's website so that your software knows about the latest viruses.

5.3 Installing **network management software** is essential when providing a shared Internet link for a number of computers.

- Network management and gateway software can be used to restrict the type of content that can be viewed.
- You can use management software to limit the time users spend online.

5.4 **Inappropriate** use of email and the Internet wastes time and can cause legal problems. See **An email policy for your employees**, and **An Internet policy for your employees**.

Expert contributors

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Further help

There are other Directors' Briefing titles that can help you. These briefings are referred to in the text by name.

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