

Online forums

Internet know-how

Community spirit

Talk to like-minded internet users

Discover how to use newsgroups, message boards and web forums to further your interests

KEY DETAILS

SKILL LEVEL – INTERMEDIATE



NOW YOU CAN...



- ◆ Set up Outlook Express to receive newsgroups
- ◆ Join an MSN group
- ◆ Use a web-based forum

PROJECT TIME

45 MINUTES

ON THE WEB

- ◆ www.news.individual.net
- ◆ <http://groups.msn.com>

Newsgroups and online forums are ideal places to make contact with like-minded individuals to discuss the topics that you hold dear. However, it's important to approach these internet resources in the appropriate manner.

Forum savvy

You need to know how to use them in a technical sense – which software to use and how to configure it – but you also need to know the unwritten rules of discourse in these places. Approached correctly, you can derive much pleasure from them and even pick up a few new friends along the way. Get it wrong and you could end up being

SENDING A POST TO A NEWSGROUP IS NO HARDER THAN CREATING AN EMAIL

flamed, which means receiving abusive messages.

Usenet is another name for the section of the internet that deals with newsgroups. A newsgroup is a little like a discussion channel on a CB radio or a communal bulletin board, and sending a post to a newsgroup is no more difficult than creating an email, although the difference is that it is intended for a large number of recipients. Email is not always private, but a Usenet posting is blatantly

public – anyone who drops into the particular newsgroup concerned can read the message. That's the point: you want to discuss the matter openly, but it's worth bearing in mind that anyone on the internet could read what you write.

Get the message

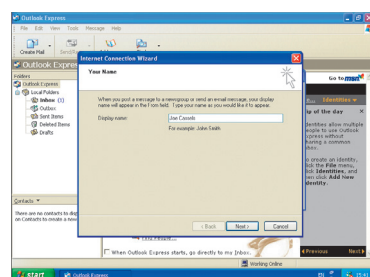
Think of a newsgroup as a big message board. When you write a post, you're pinning a postcard to that board for other people to read.

Someone else dropping by might read your message and pin a reply just below it, and yet another person could reply to your message or to its initial reply. As the discussion continues, a string of linked messages develops and this collection of posts is known as a thread.

The structure of a newsgroup is quite ordered, but its users aren't. In most cases it's a complete free-for-all, although some groups are moderated. In this case, a person or group of people elects to screen the messages before they are published. They vet them, usually in terms of relevance, decency and whether they comply with the group's rules.

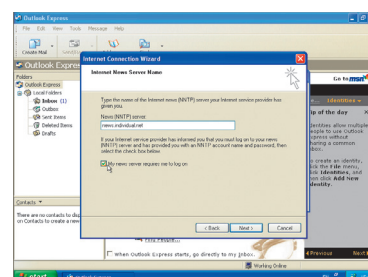
STEP BY STEP HOW TO USE NEWSGROUPS

Set up Outlook Express to connect to a news server



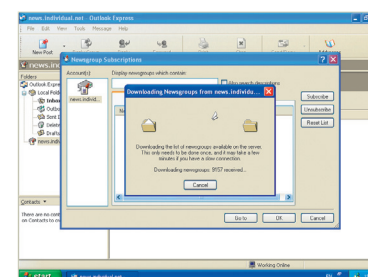
1 INSTALL A NEWS ACCOUNT

Open Outlook Express and choose Tools > Accounts, and then move to the News tab. To add a news server account, simply select Add > News, and type your name as it will appear to newsgroup readers. Click Next.



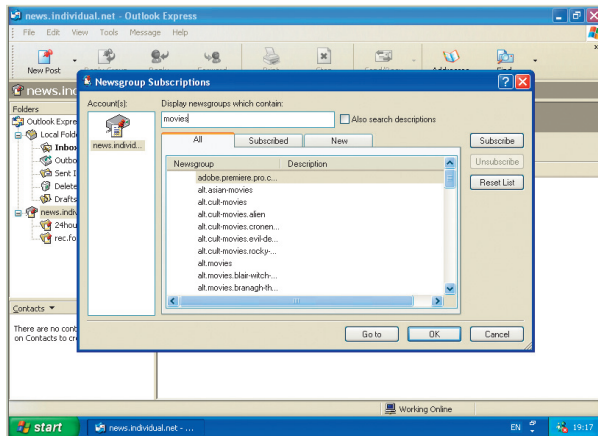
2 ACCOUNT DETAILS

Type your email address. Click Next and enter the news server name, which will probably be in the form of news.yourisp.co.uk. If necessary, check the box marked 'My news server requires me to log on' and provide the login details.



3 COLLECT THE GROUPS

Click Next, and then Finish. Agree to download the current list of groups on the server; this may take a little time as there are a lot of them and the list grows each day. Once downloaded, choose a newsgroup and click Go To.



Use keywords to narrow down your choice of newsgroups and find the ones you want.

Moderated groups are rare, because they involve employing people who have to spend a lot of time reading incoming messages. As most newsgroups are thus unmoderated, people can say pretty much what they want – this is fantastic for free speech, but not so good for common courtesy.

Beware of trolls

There are many people who spend the majority of their life on the internet, and some of them go spoiling for a fight just for entertainment. They simply dip into newsgroups and abuse their members. They may be blatant and go in all guns blazing, or subtle and engage people in discussion before turning on the insults.

Such people are known as 'trolls' and are best avoided.

In order to receive newsgroups you need a program called a newsreader. There are several to choose from, but Outlook Express is the obvious choice because it comes as part of Windows XP and you are probably accustomed to it as an email client. Unless you're a highly technical internet user it's ideal, as you can easily add newsgroups to Outlook Express by simply adding a news server account. Follow the step-by-step guide on the previous page for details of connecting to a news server.

Many ISPs maintain their own news servers, which are often named 'news' followed by the ISP's domain name. For example, MyISP, with a home page of www.myisp.co.uk, might have a news server called news.myisp.co.uk.



Usually you can only directly access a news server when you're connected to its ISP via its own dial-up or broadband connection. However, many ISPs don't maintain their news servers well, so you might want to consider joining a third-party server.

Free servers


An excellent free news server is news.individual.net; go to www.news.individual.net to apply to join. News.individual.net doesn't handle binary files. Some news servers enable you to post any kind of file with your messages to groups that have binaries in the name, but it's not wise to get involved with binary newsgroups as the attached files could include viruses or spyware. Text-only news servers are safer.

Once you've signed up to a news server and imported the

Don't let your youngsters onto forums without supervision. MSN offers some practical advice.

current list of newsgroups into Outlook Express – or other newsreader of your choice – select the news server in the left-hand column. Click the Newsgroups button to see a full list of groups on the server, then enter a keyword to narrow down the group list and select a group to view. Click Go To, and wait as the headers are downloaded.

To read the body of a news message, select the header in the upper pane, in exactly the same way as you read an email. If you want to respond, click Reply to send the poster a private email, although be aware that few people use their real email address, or click Reply Group to post your response so that everyone can read it. To start a new



What's the point of netiquette?

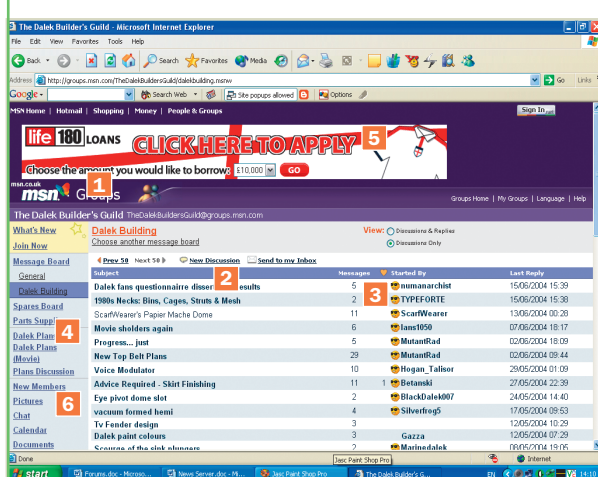
Joe Cassels guides you through the finer points of newsgroup posting

Q I tried replying to a post on a newsgroup, and the replies were horrible. I was branded a 'top poster' and told to stop shouting in no uncertain terms, and the posters berated me for leaving the original post in my reply. I found it most upsetting. Why are these rules so important?

A Conventions rule in many circumstances and netiquette is no different to the conventions for writing a formal letter. It's uncomfortable to read a post that's all in capitals, and it's best to only quote the part of the previous post that's relevant to your reply. It's also easier for others to read comments after the previous post.

IN DETAIL MSN GROUPS

These groups can make even the most obscure hobby a transparent affair



Subject	Messages	Started By	Last Reply
Dalek Building	5	mmmanarchit	15/05/2004 15:39
Spares Board	2	TYPEFORTE	15/05/2004 15:38
Parts Swap	11	ScarfWear	13/05/2004 00:20
Dalek Plans	6	lans1950	07/05/2004 18:17
Progress... just	5	MutanRad	02/05/2004 18:09
New Top Belt Plans	29	MutanRad	02/05/2004 09:44
Voice Modulator	10	Hogan_Talitor	28/05/2004 01:09
Advice Required - Skirt Finishing	11	Bitamki	27/05/2004 22:39
Eye phor done slot	2	BlasDaMab07	24/05/2004 14:40
vacuum formed panel	4	Silverfrog5	17/05/2004 09:53
Tv Fender design	3	Gazza	12/05/2004 10:29
Dalek paint colours	3	Gazza	12/05/2004 07:29
Scratches on the clock mechanism	7	Marino-dalok	05/05/2004 19:05

- Group name**
This identifies the subject of interest. This group is for people whose hobby is building replica props from a well-known TV series.
- Threads**
Each subject here is a link to a series of messages. Members can add new messages in response to earlier ones.
- Message details**
This shows the number of messages in a thread and the name of the member who posted the original message. Most names here are handles.
- Resource documents**
Unlike newsgroups, an MSN group can carry a set of core resources. These could be plans, a constitution or a set of core values.
- Advertisement**
MSN Groups is free to use because it is supported by advertising.
- Additional resources**
This group has a chatroom, photograph albums and a shared calendar.

Top fact

Aged newsgroups

Usenet is the oldest part of the internet, and carries all newsgroups and bulletin boards. Postings go back as far as 1981, which isn't a long time in human terms, but compared with the rest of the internet it makes Usenet a veritable dinosaur. Google Groups enables you to search through an enormous cache of all postings to Usenet since 1981. People can opt out of their messages being cached, but the vast majority of posts do end up in this store.

Expert tip

Managing messages

If you use newsgroups regularly, the number of downloaded messages you accrue can become overwhelming. Control them by clicking Tools > Options, and choosing the Maintenance tab. Check 'Delete news messages x days after being downloaded' and set x to a sensible level. To remove all downloaded news messages select 'Clean Up Now', and then choose Reset, to clear evidence of these messages being downloaded; they'll then be downloaded anew when you next visit.

Read on

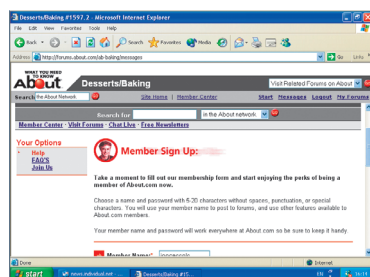
- ◆ The Rough Guide to the Internet
- ◆ £6
- ◆ ISBN: 1843531011

This handy little tome is updated yearly and remains one of the finest guides to cyberspace. Among much practical information about what to find online and how to protect your PC, it includes a section on newsgroups and forums and there's an excellent description of good and bad practice. The vagaries of netiquette are also explained and it is illuminated with simple, easy-to-follow guidelines. Coming from a publisher that focuses on the travel market, it provides a remarkable amount of common sense, putting many of the more technical books to shame.



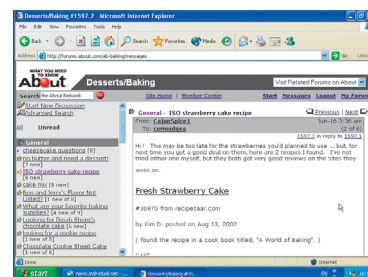
STEP BY STEP WEB FORUMS

These are often used for support, but they can cover a wide range of subjects



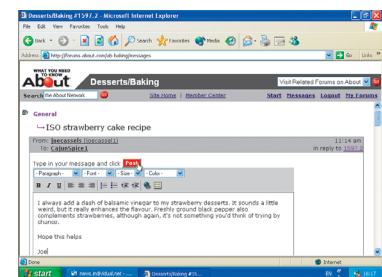
1 FORUM HOSTS

There are several forum portals. This one is US-based and comes as part of the About network. Head to <http://forums.about.com>, and select a topic; you can read without signing up, but you need to register if you want to post.



2 FOLLOW A THREAD

This baking forum displays the thread titles on the left. To move through a thread, use the Previous and Next buttons in the top right-hand corner. To respond to a message, scroll to the bottom and click Reply.



3 POST A REPLY

Keep your reply short and to the point, and be polite. Remember that anyone on the internet can read this, so bear in mind the kind of impression you would like to make. Once you're happy with your text, click Post to send it off.

thread, click New Post and write and send it just as you would an email.

There are a number of written and unwritten rules to follow when sending Usenet posts, and these are often termed netiquette, as they are similar to social conventions. Many groups have a related web page that contains a FAQ file, so perform an internet search to try to find it or scan the group itself for evidence of its existence. Make sure you've read it or confirmed that no such document exists before posting a message.

The usual rules for social intercourse aren't adhered to by many on Usenet, and the insults can fly at the smallest provocation. Start by lurking (reading but not posting) for a while in a group that you want to join, so that you get a feel for the way it works and also get to know the regular posters before diving in.

Rules of posting

Some rules are sacrosanct, even if they seem a little odd to begin with. First, don't cross post, which means sending the same message to multiple newsgroups – it's lazy and creates unnecessary duplication. Second, make sure that Caps Lock is turned off when you type, as capital letters are the text equivalent of shouting.

Lastly, when replying to a message, don't put your text

FORUMS AND NEWSGROUPS CAN BE A LOT OF FUN AND ARE HUGEY INFORMATIVE

at the top, which is where Outlook Express places the cursor by default, but type it below the original message; you should also trim the previous posting to only include the relevant part. Unnecessary duplication irritates others, and viewing the reply after the question makes better sense than the other way around. You should

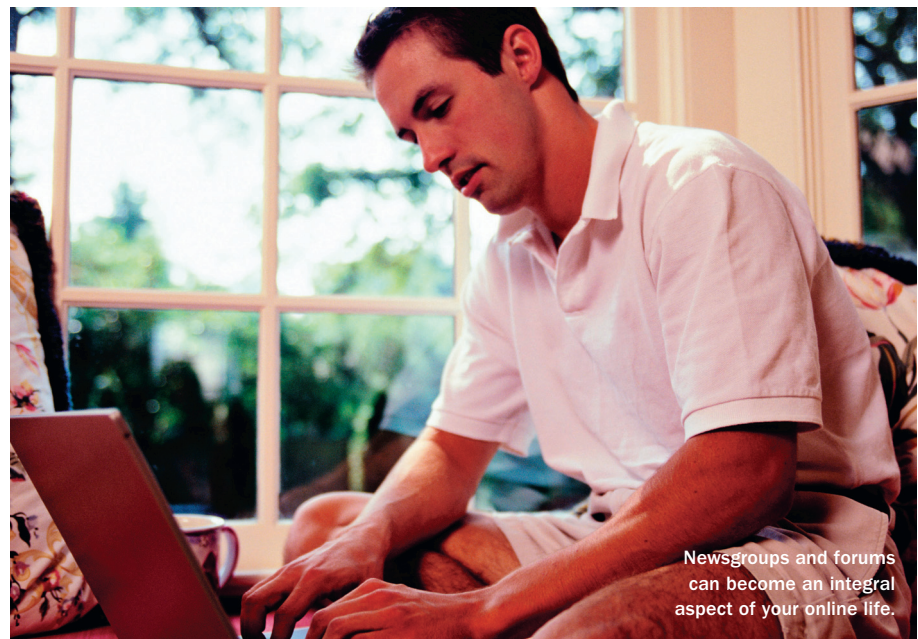
expect to be flamed (abused) by other users of the group if you flout these rules.

Web-based forums

Web forums are similar to newsgroups, but you access them via a web portal. The same kind of threading applies, as does the need to adhere to netiquette and read FAQs. MSN Groups provides

the facility to create new groups, but you'll need to get people to visit them if you want a meaningful discussion.

Most forums require you to join before you can post, but you can normally lurk without joining. You usually need to provide an active email address and some personal information when applying. Forums and newsgroups can be a lot of fun and hugely informative, but most posters are anonymous, so take any advice with a pinch of salt. The majority of users are genuine and helpful, so simply avoid those who aren't. ■



Newsgroups and forums can become an integral aspect of your online life.

PHOTO: PHOTOLIBRARY.COM