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…

Microsoft Windows xp

◆ 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 for 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.
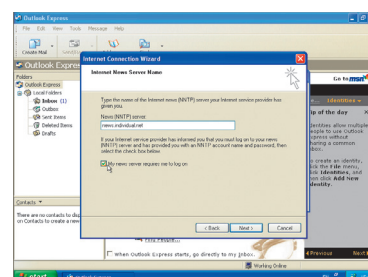
≫ STEP BY STEP HOW TO USE NEWSGROUPS
### Set up Outlook Express to connect to a news server
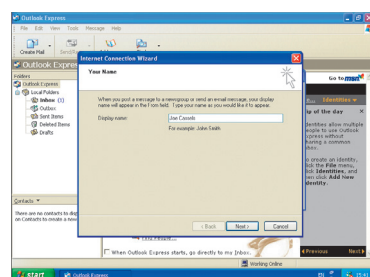
1 INSTALL A NEWS ACCOUNT Open Outlook Express and choose Tools > Accounts, and then move to the News tab. To add a news server account, simply select Add > News, and type your name as it will appear to newsgroup readers. Click Next.

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.
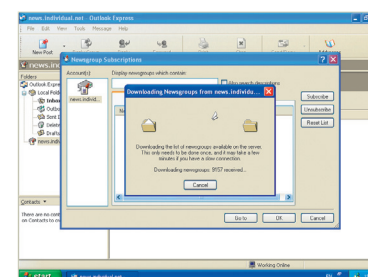
3 COLLECT THE GROUPS Click Next, and then Finish. Agree to download the current list of groups on the server; this may take a little time as there are a lot of them and the list grows each day. Once downloaded, choose a newsgroup and click Go To.
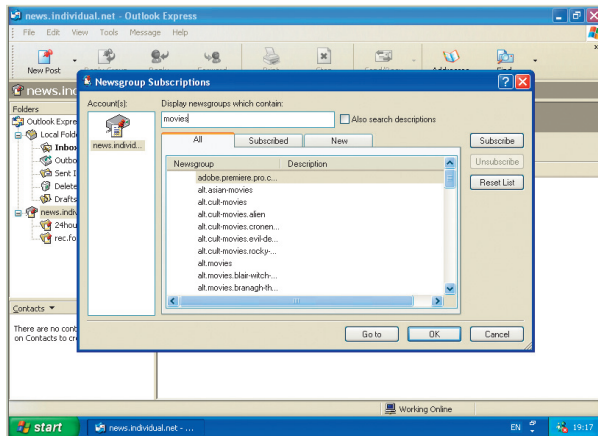
Use keywords to narrow down your choice of newsgroups and find the ones you want.

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 un-moderated, 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 ▶
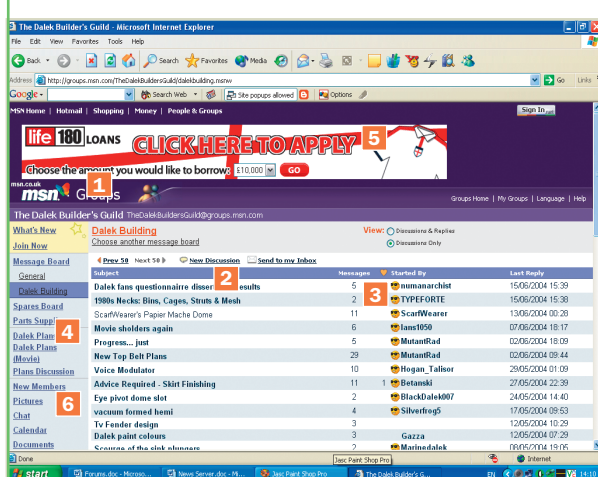
▶▶ IN DETAIL MSN GROUPS

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

1 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.

2 Threads
Each subject here is a link to a series of messages. Members can add new messages in response to earlier ones.

3 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.

4 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.

5 Advertisement
MSN Groups is free to use because it is supported by advertising.

6 Additional resources
This group has a chatroom, photograph albums and a shared calendar.

≫ STEP BY STEP WEB FORUMS

These are often used for support, but they can cover a wide range of subjects
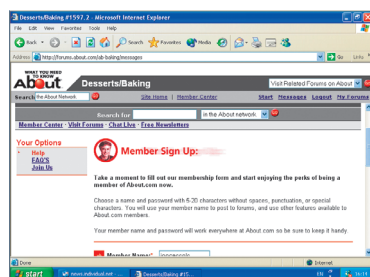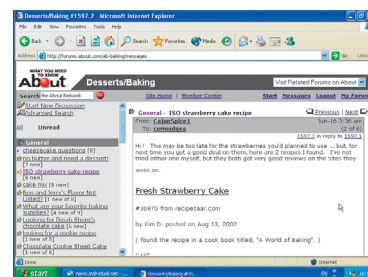
**1 FORUM HOSTS**
There are several forum portals. This one is US-based and comes as part of the About network. Head to http://forums.about.com, and select a topic; you can read without signing up, but you need to register if you want to post.

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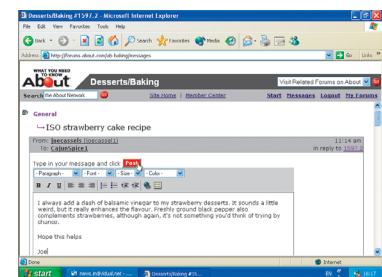
3 POST A REPLY
Keep your reply short and to the point, and be polite. Remember that anyone on the internet can read this, so bear in mind the kind of impression you would like to make. Once you're happy with your text, click Post to send it off.

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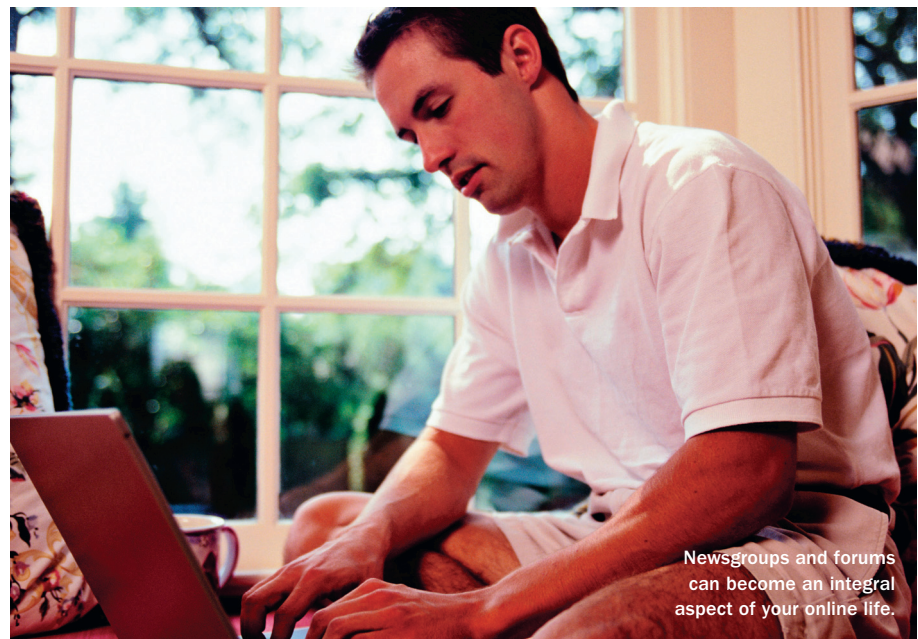
Newsgroups and forums can become an integral aspect of your online life.