

# COG-net

By Derek Buchler

In our last column, Rick talked a little bit out what the Internet is, how it ties into COG, and what you, the COGer, can see and do on the Internet.

So perhaps we've piqued your interest and you're thinking about getting on the Internet. The first thing that you're going to need to do is sign up with a company That can give you access to the Internet. The process is analogous to signing up for cable television only you have more choices than your local cable provider. In essence, you want to "subscribe" to a service that will meet your needs, with a company that will deliver the type of connection that best suits you.

There are three basic types of companies that offer Internet service. Each type has its pros and cons. (I should note that the mentioning of corporate names in this article is by no means an endorsement of any particular company.)

## On-Line Service Providers

There are large corporations that offer one-stop shopping for on-line services. Names that you might be familiar with are *America OnLine* (AOL), *Prodigy*, and *CompuServe*. These companies will provide you with their own program that integrates e-mail, a web browser, a news group reader, and several others, into one easily installable software package. With minimal effort, you can be connected to the Internet within a few minutes.

These companies offer a variety of different pricing structures. Typically, they offer "blocks of time" that you purchase on a monthly basis. For instance, AOL offers 20 hours of connect time for roughly \$20. If you exceed your monthly allotment, you are billed for the extra hours. (Ed. note: *The AOL pricing structure has changed since this article was written.*)

The pros of this type of connection is relative ease of getting "on-line" with minimal learning. There is no need to gather The correct software, and there is no need for extensive configuration by the user. Another positive aspect, which can be important to us COGers is that these companies have local dial-up connections nationwide. Thus means that no matter where you are in most of the world, you can probably log in to your "account" with only a local phone call, i.e. no long distance charges. Additionally, these types of services are rich in content, providing direct "links" to news, weather, sports, stock markets, hobbies, etc.

The downside to these companies is that the lack of flexibility in software selection. In other words, the software you are provided with by the company is the software *you* MUST use. If *you* find a piece of software that has features you'd like to try, the chances are you won't be able to use it with this type of Internet service provider until (and if) they update their software.

Another negative aspect to these large corporations is that there is very little "hand holding". In other words, if you have a problem, you may not be able to get a question answered in a timely fashion.

One final downside to these types of providers can be cost. If you stay within your purchased number of hours on a monthly basis, then you know exactly how much you're going to spend. Going over your allotted time can add up, which of course means less \$\$\$ for that next Concours accessory you've been planning on.

## National Internet Service Providers (with apologies to our friends that are not in the U.S. or Canada)

National Internet Service Providers are similar in nature to the On-Line Service providers. They offer local access numbers nation wide in most metropolitan areas. The main difference is that these companies provide just an access point to the Internet. Once you've connected, it's up to you to determine "where you want to go and what you want to see." Like the On-line Service Providers, the national ISP's offer some software "to help you get started. This is usually a collection of free, or shareware, programs that are popular among many users. If find a different piece of software that is more suitable to *you'* needs, you'll usually have far fewer problems integrating it with this type of Internet connection. These companies typically offer different pricing plans, including unlimited connect time for one monthly fee. For example *Sprynet* offers unlimited connect time to the Internet for \$19.95 per month. Other companies such as *The Internet Access Company* (TIAC), *The World*, and *EarthLink*, also offer similar pricing plans.

Pros for National ISP's include local dial-up access across much of the US, attractive pricing plans, and the ability to select the software that suits your needs best.

Cons for national ISP's are that you're typically dealing with a large corporation which may lead to long response times in case of questions or problems, or in other

words, little "hand-holding" for the newcomer to the Internet.

## Local Internet Service Providers

Throughout the world, localized, (and smaller) ISP's are sprouting up every day. Though these companies, a user can get on-line and then access the rest of the internet. These smaller companies are typically (but not always) less expensive than the national companies. Like the national ISP's they will have pre-configured software packages assembled from free, or shareware, programs for quick access. The difference in the smaller ISP's is that there is usually someone to talk to when you run into a problem. These companies are eager for your business and will make the extra effort to make sure that you're satisfied in order to keep *you* as a customer.

The pros for using a local ISP are you're almost always guaranteed that the connection is a local call from your home, there is more "hand holding" in case of problems and/or questions, and the most flexibility in the software *you* use. Pricing may or may not be more attractive.

The cons for using a local ISP can be expensive and somewhat cryptic software configurations, intermittent service, busy lines during prime calling hours, and they may not have hardware that ensures reliability if a piece of their equipment fails. A minor downside to a local ISP is that if you want to connect to "your account" you have to dial long distance to your home town. However, there are ways you can check your mail from a friend or associates computer using their Internet connection,

## Summary

The amount of information here may seem scary at first. It really isn't. If you try one service and are not happy with it, you can always change. Unlike most service oriented contracts or subscriptions, you should consider whether along term contract is cost effective. The Internet is constantly changing, and what might be a good deal today, could change in two or three months.

We'll be taking a break in the next issue, and devoting most of it's content for rallies and rides. Look for our column after that, when we'll show you a few interesting motorcycle web sites we've found on the Internet, some of the more popular web search engines, and provide a list of some pertinent COG e-mail addresses,

See ya on the net!

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