

Help wanted

Readers have written to **Stephen Cobb** asking for advice on all sorts of comms-related subjects, and here he soothes some troubled brows. Plus finding forums, and help with HTML coding.

Answers to your questions make up most of this month's column, starting with this from Barry Stanley: "I read your pages in *PCW* and you obviously understand many people's frustration trying to get anything to work on the Internet or CompuServe, so I thought I'd send you my example from today. You have described an interesting Corporate Logo screen-saver which can be found on a Windows Audio Visual Forum. I have just tried to locate it with no success."

Mr Stanley then provides a list of failed commands, followed by these remarks: "As an aside, I have a physics degree and

work in the semiconductor industry. If I can't get much joy, how do non-technical people manage? Of all my friends/colleagues I've spoken to, none have found any use for the Internet at all (except email which we use extensively). It seems to be just for complete PC nerds using a telephone line that someone else is paying for. Thanks again for your *PCW* articles, however don't ever underestimate the need to explain things in ABC style."

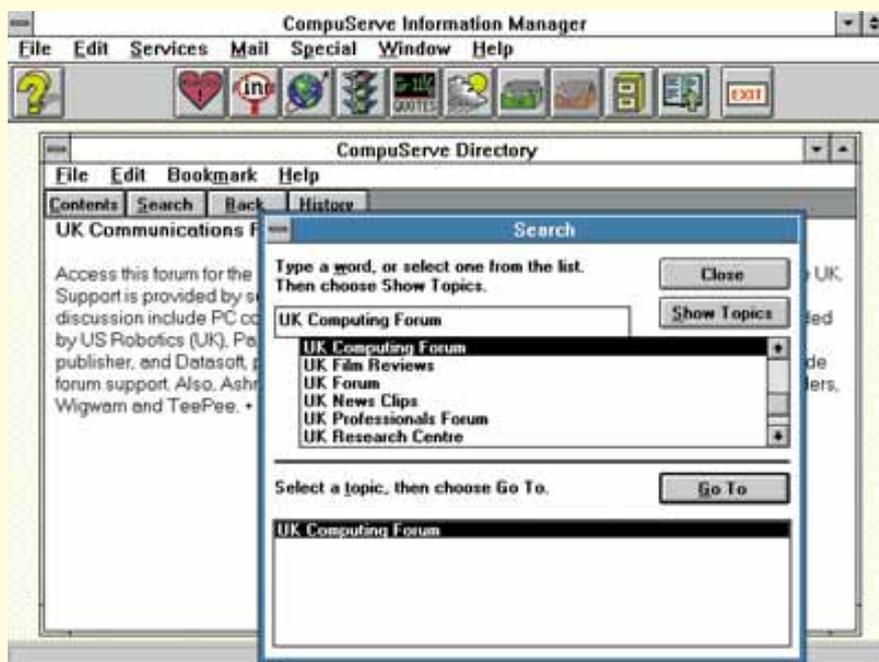
Obviously this letter was written during a moment of frustration, but it raises some important points, besides the very practical question of how you find things on

CompuServe, which we will get to in a moment. Having spent several fruitless weeks trying to install Windows 95, frustration is something I understand. I also understand that the frustration factor is amplified by glib remarks from those who have somehow managed whatever techno-feat it is that you are banging your head up against.

In this particular case I am guilty of tossing out a remark like "you can find this software in the Windows Audio Visual forum on CompuServe" without providing sufficient clues as to how you would actually do that. In the "old days", before graphical user interfaces were invented, CompuServe users navigated the system with text commands, one of which was "GO" followed by the code name of the forum. For the most part these "GO codes" were logical, but like DOS they did not work unless you spelled them correctly. As the number of forums climbed from the dozens into the hundreds, the GO codes became more arcane. The GO code allocated for the Windows Audio Visual Forum is GO WINAV.

You can still issue the GO command using WinCIM and MacCIM (the following commands are for WinCIM, please check the MacCIM Help for the equivalents). I usually access GO by typing Ctrl+G but you can also select Go from the Services menu, or click on the traffic-light button (graphical user interfaces may be easier to use, but when they offer three different ways of doing the same thing they are definitely harder to explain).

If you use WinCIM to visit a forum and decide it is likely to be a regular stop on your tour of the infobahn, then you can add it to the Favorite (sic) Places list. If you click the Add button in the Favorite Places dialogue box immediately after accessing a forum, the appropriate GO word and forum description are already entered for you and you can simply click OK to add this forum to the list. This allows you to visit the forum by double-clicking on the entry in the Favorite Places list (this can be presented in alpha order or ranked by number of accesses — that is, most popular at the top). If you want to add a forum at some other time you will need to type in a description and enter the GO word.



You don't have to go on-line to find the right forums in Compuserve, but you do need to make sure you have a recent listing

Finding out

So how do you find interesting forums? Again there are several paths to enlightenment, none of them immediately obvious but all fairly effective. The most obvious path is a suggestion from a friend, or from an article like this (if the writer remembers to include the GO word). If you are searching from scratch, the cheapest place to start is the CompuServe Directory icon that is placed in the CompuServe program group when you install WinCIM. This loads a hypertext directory of CompuServe services in the form of a Windows Help file (either *almanac.hlp* or *compudir.hlp*). You can use the standard Search button and

enter subject-related words to locate forums of interest and their GO codes.

Since new forums are being added on a regular basis it is worth checking the date of your copy of *almanac.hlp*. I was surprised to find mine was dated back in 1994, even though I upgraded to WinCIM 1.4 earlier this year. I am not sure if all of the floppy disk 1.4 upgrades include the latest version of the file. The CD-ROM upgrades appear to include it but I cannot find a version of *almanac.hlp* anywhere on CompuServe itself. You would think that the most recent version would be readily available for downloading (I am also unclear as to why some versions use a

Windows on the Web

Ian Fitzpatrick wrote to say: "I have been reading your very informative columns in *PCW* and was interested to see your mention of WinHTTPD which appears to allow a Windows PC to act as a Web server." This is true: Windows *httpd* 1.4 is available free to non-commercial users and is only \$99 for a commercial licence (however, Windows *httpd* it is not the only path to a PC-based Web service).

Ian continues: "I would be most grateful

rapidly-emerging favourite in this field is Linux, a freeware version of Unix that runs on 386 and 486 machines (as well as Acorns). You can download Linux from various sites (although it is very large and you might want to buy it on CD — for sources check <http://www.linux.uk.org>).

A CD-ROM containing the full Linux code, plus a compatible version of X Windows (which is a Windows-like graphical user interface for Unix systems) may even

be available from your local bookstore. There is one included with the Ventana Press *Web Server Book* by Magid, Matthews and Jones. This very handy book/CD package provides everything you need to set up a Web site, including version 1.1 of NetScape Navigator and both the CERN and the NCSA *httpd* Serve software.

While the idea of learning a whole new operating system might seem daunting, there is plenty of documenta-

tion available and the basic commands will not be too much to handle if you already know DOS. What is the point of using Linux on a PC as opposed to Windows? Speed. Although many Web pages are highly graphical, you don't need to be running a graphics machine to serve up the pages. Operating in character mode Linux is very fast, particularly if you can afford 16Mb of RAM (it will work as a Web server with 8, but the more the better). With a good high-speed phone line you should be able to handle thousands of "hits" per day, achieving performance equivalent to lower-end Sun SparcStations, with a box that dual-boots to DOS and uses all your peripherals.



Free Web server software for Windows?

That's Windows *httpd* 1.4, on the Web

if you could provide me with some sites or addresses where I could get hold of Win-HTTPD." The short answer is <http://www.city.net/win-httpd/>. A less direct route is to head for the home page set up for the excellent Prima Online book *Building a Web Site*. This trip is worth taking since it provides links to a wide range of Web server software sites

(<http://www.netgen.com/book>). There are also links to a range of Web server utilities.

The fact is, you may want to consider something besides Windows/DOS if you want to run a Web site with a 486 PC. A

version of the file called compudir.hlp — perhaps I can get answers by next month).

If you cannot find what you want in the directory, try the Find command (on the Services menu). This does a simple online search for forums and definitely uses an up-to-date version of the forum list. The results of your search are presented in a list alongside current entries in your Favorite Places list. This allows you to see which forums are already in your FP list (marked with a tick) and add new ones directly to the FP list.

HTML tips

Recently I spent several weeks coding about 60 HTML (hyper-text markup language) pages for a new World Wide Web site. In the process I picked up several tips. While html coding is the focus of an article elsewhere in this issue of *PCW*, I think these tips will also help users of Web pages to understand them better.

For example, most people know that Web pages are specially-coded text files that are stored on a computer system called a Web server. The operating system on many Web servers is Unix, rather than DOS/Windows. This means they can use the file extension .html which is one character too long for DOS or Windows 3.11 (both Windows 95 and the Macintosh OS can handle longer names, as can OS/2).

Consequently, if you are coding pages on a DOS/Windows machine you have to store the files as filename.htm. However, on the system that ultimately stores and displays the pages, the Web server, the file extensions may be changed to html. This means you need to write the references in your file links in the filename.html format, which naturally gives rise to some errors and inconsistencies. For example, the person who writes the pages may leave some links pointing to filename.htm when the correct reference is filename.html. As a Web user you may click on a link with your browser and get a "page not found" message when in fact the problem is simply a missing "l" in a link. If you enter the location or URL by hand, you may be able to overcome this error and get to the desired page.

You might wonder how the person who created the error in the link could have missed it. I mean, don't these people test their work? Well, this is easier said than done. For one thing, some browsers make testing difficult because they are so smart. Recent versions of NetScape actually overlook the differences between htm and html. In fact, they even overlook missing

code elements, such as closing brackets and quotations. This means NetScape will present a "faulty" page as though it were written correctly. The result can be pages that look terrible in Spry Mosaic or other, less "intelligent" browsers.

So why not test with Spry Mosaic? I tried this, but it's a pain because Spry will not read local files if they have the htm extension and your link specifies html. You have to do a lot of search and replace (in my case, 60 pages worth) to switch between the two extensions. In fact, I decided it was easier to go live with the pages, browse them with Spry to spot mistakes, then immediately correct the code. If anybody else has a better method I would be happy to hear it.

I did try proofing pages with HoTMetaL Pro, but that found so many errors (due to incompatibilities between different versions of html) that it was slow going. Besides, that approach does not show you what pages look like under the different browsers. It is quite disappointing to spend hours on an effect, such as centred images, only to see what a mess they look in a browser that does not do centred images.

One final tip: remember that there are still a lot of users who browse the Web with Lynx, a non-graphics Unix browser. I was reminded of this when I received an email feedback from the pages I designed (at www.ncsa.com) politely listing all of the code changes needed to optimise the pages for Lynx viewers.

UK Forums

If you haven't been there lately, there have been some major changes to the UK forums on CompuServe, specifically: UKIT (GO UKIT) and UKVENA (GO UKVENA). The UKIT (UK Information Technology) and UKVENA (UK Vendor A), open as the old UKCOMMS and UKCOMP forums close, to allow more space for UK-based vendors in UKVENA and increased UK-centric coverage of subjects such as the Internet, comms, mobile phones, and so on (note that the old GO words UKCOMP and UKCOMMS will both take you to UKIT, but this only a temporary arrangement and you should change your software settings to GO UKIT and GO UKVENA).

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