(a) Chapter 11

(b) Choosing a Connection

When the time comes to start thinking about making your first connection to the Internet, the first question you must answer is, "Which Internet access provider should I work with?"

*** Begin Note ***

Note

Just so I don't lose anyone, an Internet access provider, also called an Internet service provider or just Internet provider, is a company that you call with a modem to access the Internet. In the same way that you work with your local telephone company to access the world-wide telephone system, so too must you work with an Internet access provider to access the Internet.

*** End Note ***

Arriving at the proper answer to that question can be either extremely simple or really quite difficult. If you live in a place

where there is only one local Internet provider, the answer is quite easy—work with a local provider whenever possible because it's almost always cheaper to make a local phone call than to call long distance. If you're blessed, or cursed, with a multitude of Internet providers, the choice becomes more difficult. Although you may have more to choose from, you also have to spend more time figuring out the differences.

(c) Eliminating Options

However, many people never get to that point, because they're confused by the difference between accessing the Internet through a commercial service like America Online or through a MacTCP-based PPP account with a true Internet provider. Then there are those people who are trying to decide between a Unix shell account and a MacTCP-based SLIP or PPP account. And what about the aging UUCP war-horse? But first, let's talk about what can be the easiest way to get started for many people—the commercial information services.

(d) Commercial Services

In my opinion, there are only a few reasons to choose a commercial online service like America Online, CompuServe, or eWorld over a full Internet connection. First, if your area has a local number for the commercial service, but doesn't yet have a local Internet provider, the costs of accessing the commercial online service can be somewhat lower than calling an Internet provider long distance. You may want to read on to see what I say about how the costs all work out, though, because the commercial online services all charge you by the hour after a certain number of free hours (or if you use certain services, and those costs aren't always as up front as they should be). Nonetheless, it's easy to spend a lot of time on the Internet, and if you've got a local call to America Online, for instance, the $3.50 per hour that they charge

after your free hours will probably be less than you would pay for a long distance call anywhere.

The second reason for considering a commercial online service in favor of a real Internet connection is a bit hard for me to admit, given my obvious Internet biases. Quite frankly, it's often easier to set up an account with eWorld or America Online than it is to configure the necessary software to communicate with an Internet provider. For instance, you can call an 800 number to get a copy of the special software for America Online or eWorld (the numbers are in the next chapter), and they offer tech support for their software. That said, I feel that you pay for that initial ease of use (which isn't guaranteed—I've often had those automated signup processes fail in ways that would confuse a beginner) with software that simply isn't up to snuff in comparison with what you can get for MacTCP-based connections.

For instance, I gave my grandmother a Macintosh Classic for Christmas, and my sister gave her a 2400 bps modem. We got her up on America Online because it was a local call. Both she and my father, who was helping her, have had quite a lot of trouble with the way America Online handles nicknames (my father's used to Eudora), and the first question she sent me after only a few messages was, "How come I can't quote replies like everyone else can?" Well, the answer is quite simply, "America Online's software doesn't do that." I don't quite dare introduce my grandmother to utilities that would enable her to quote replies because they would undoubtedly add to the confusion.

That said, I still feel that America Online was the right choice for her, in large part because she's not really interested in being on the Internet so much as being able to send and receive Internet email. That's perhaps the third reason to use a commercial online service instead of the Internet. If you really aren't all that interested in the Internet and don't plan on spending much time online, you can't beat the commercial services for a combination of inexpensive access (as long as you stick within your free hours each month) and relative ease of use. Since you won't be using the software much, the fact that it may lack (and I speak for all the commercial services here—their software is for the most part mediocre) essential features isn't that important.

Finally, the commercial services all offer a great deal of quality information and files to download. If you have no desire to explore beyond the walls of the commercial service, then by all

means, don't bother! You shouldn't get on the Internet just because someone said you had to. You should want to get on because otherwise you'll probably convince yourself that the Internet is a waste of time. And, you'll be right—for you, the Internet will be a waste of time.

(d) Bulletin Board Systems

The main reason that I'd recommend using a BBS over a full Internet connection is because most BBSs are extremely cheap or free. Increasingly, BBSs provide Internet email and news (often using a UUCP connection, I'll discuss this in a moment), and some are putting in direct Internet connections that enable you to use services like the World Wide Web from within the BBS. I expect more of these services will appear in BBS software in the future.

Because many boards are free, they're also potentially unreliable as well (since the person running the BBS probably isn't watching it 24 hours a day). That can be a serious problem if you rely on your Internet connection for business or important personal communication.

Finding a local BBS can be a daunting task because most communities don't have listings of them in the newspaper or anywhere else for that matter. The best place to start is at your dealer or any local computer store. These people can often point you to someone on the staff who uses bulletin boards, or they may direct you to local user groups, which often operate bulletin boards.

(d) Unix Shell Accounts

Okay, so you've decided that you do want to get on the Internet after all, but you see that one provider is offering a connection for much less than another. Why the difference? Well, in this prefabricated-for-your-convenience example, the first provider only offers a Unix shell account, whereas the second provider offers full SLIP or PPP access so you can use MacTCP-based software. Again, I must bare my biases.

I use a Macintosh because I feel that the Macintosh interface is as good as we've got right now. I won't pretend it's perfect, and I've

used plenty of other systems as well. I simply feel, and if you own a Mac you probably agree with me, that I'd rather use a Macintosh than type cryptic commands at a command line.

Well, that's the difference between the Unix shell account and the SLIP or PPP account. If you have a Unix shell account, you'll end up typing at that command line more than you like. If you do end up with a shell account, I strongly recommend that you get a different book because I don't cover how to use Unix at all in this one. I prefer to concentrate on the Macintosh instead, and to cover two operating systems well would be a tremendous amount of work. If you decide to take this route, I recommend Ed Krol's *The Whole Internet User's Guide and Catalog* (O'Reilly & Associates). Ed does a great job of explaining in detail how to work with the Internet on a Unix machine. Besides, Ed's a great guy, and he uses a Macintosh PowerBook Duo and Eudora in real life.

However, there is now some software that I'll talk about in chapter 14, "Shell Account Enhancements," that goes a long way toward giving you SLIP (and soon PPP) access from a Unix shell account. This software, called TIA, or The Internet Adapter, is an impressive feat, but that said, I still don't recommend it for the complete novice. It's Unix software that you must install in your Unix shell account, and there's just enough tricky stuff that it's not easy for the novice. If you've used Unix before and have done some scripting on the Macintosh, you'll probably be fine, though, and a TIA-enhanced shell account may be a great option for you.

Finding a Unix shell account is similar to finding a SLIP or PPP account; although, Phil Eschallier has compiled a list of sites, called the nixpub list, that focuses on Unix shell accounts. To receive the latest copy (this assumes you have an email account somewhere else already, of course), send email to **mail-server@bts.com** and put **get PUB nixpub.long** in the body of the message. The list is approximately 60K.

Also, try calling the help desks at local universities or colleges because some provide limited access to their machines. If you work at a university or large computer-oriented business, of course, you probably simply have to ask the right person, so start with the help desk or the person who takes care of your computers.

(d) UUCP

But what about UUCP? Sure, it's old and slow and limited to email and Usenet news, but UUCP still has some uses. The main one is for an office with a number of people who only want to use email. There's no reason to pay for what is almost always a more-expensive dedicated connection when a cheap UUCP dialup connection will work fine. There are a number of UUCP gateways for the main LAN email packages like QuickMail and Microsoft Mail, and once you've got a UUCP connection set up and working, it doesn't usually require much intervention.

Of course, the real advantage of a UUCP connection via a LAN email package at work is that someone else may have set it up for you. This type of access also is generally free, but the only way to find out about it is to ask the person who takes care of your network. I can't really help you with this type of access because it varies significantly based on how your network is set up and administered.

If you're planning on setting up a UUCP connection, be clear on the fact that a UUCP connection limits you to email and Usenet news, and if you're gatewaying into a LAN email package, possibly not even Usenet news. You will never be able to use FTP, Gopher, or the World Wide Web; it's as simple as that.

Because there are relatively few UUCP connections compared to the number of MacTCP-based connections, you may have a much harder time getting help with any problems on the nets. Of course, that's an advantage of buying a commercial gateway from a company like StarNine (**info@starnine.com**) since they can provide the support.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that UUCP is a good solution for a very specific problem, but it's not really for the faint of heart or for the person who wants full Internet access. Setting up and using a MacTCP-based connection will simply be easier and more rewarding than a UUCP account for most people.

Finding a site that gives you a UUCP feed is more difficult than finding a Unix shell account, although the process is similar, especially in terms of consulting the nixpub list. In my experience, the help desks at universities seldom know about UUCP, even though Unix machines located in the Computer Science or Engineering departments often support it. You might ask around to find out who administrates those computers, then ask nicely whether they provide any UUCP feeds. UUCP is sufficiently efficient that a long distance call might make financial sense,

especially if you don't subscribe to a large newsgroup or receive large programs in email.

(d) MacTCP-based Connections

In the previous sections, I've compared, usually negatively, all of the other methods of connecting to the Internet to a full MacTCP-based connection. I'll be honest—I don't think anything else compares in terms of power, speed, flexibility, and often, expense.

The combination of PPP or SLIP and MacTCP lets you run great Macintosh programs that enable you to do everything on the Internet with a Macintosh interface. Gone are the days of the command line; now you can use programs such as Eudora for email, Anarchie for FTP, NCSA Telnet, NewsWatcher, InterNews, or Nuntius for reading news, and a slew of other wonderful applications such as Netscape, MacWeb, TurboGopher, Finger, and MacWAIS. These programs often work together to provide the most complete Internet solution that you can get. The freeware and shareware programmers in the Macintosh Internet world are always the first to come out with the best programs, giving you an ever-improving interface to the Internet.

Another important fact about MacTCP-based connections is that they offer you choices. Perhaps you prefer Netscape to MacWeb, or Nuntius to NewsWatcher. With a MacTCP-based connection, you can make that choice, whereas a commercial service or BBS limits you to their interface.

Finally, now that PPP and SLIP accounts are becoming rather common, the price for moderate to heavy Internet users is often less than you'd pay for a commercial service because many Internet providers offer flat-rate accounts. It's the best of both worlds—great software without a clock ticking in the background.

But enough about the differences between these Internet options. I assume from the fact that you bought this book over one that talks about the commercial services that you are indeed interested in using the Internet to its fullest, and from that, I can assume that you're going to want to find an Internet provider. As I said above, I see two main variables in choosing an Internet provider—cost and service.

(c) Cost

The first and, for most people, most important variable is cost. Unless you have more money than sense, it's not fun to throw money away unnecessarily. However, it can sometimes be difficult to determine the actual cost of your connection, especially if the provider has numerous little charges here and there and if you have to factor in telephone charges.

(d) Flat-Rate Accounts

The first thing to look for is a flat-rate account, under which you pay a set fee every month, no matter how much time you spend connected. Some accounts aren't technically flat-rate, but have such a high upper limit, like 120 hours each month, that they may as well be flat-rate. If you can get a flat-rate account, do it. They simply can't be beat for most people, and the lack of stress over how large your next bill will be is well worth it, in my opinion.

*** Begin Note ***

Note

Some providers offer discounts if you pay for several months or even a year in advance—it's worth asking them if they have any such discount plans when you sign up.

*** End Note ***

(d) Restricted Flat-Rate Accounts

Some flat-rate plans are flat-rate, but come with some reasonable restrictions to prevent people from abusing the service. For instance, Northwest Nexus has a two-hour-on, two-hour-off policy that it can enforce if necessary. Without such a policy, it would be easy for someone to connect and leave the modem connected all day, preventing anyone else from using that modem at the host.

Another restriction you may see is a policy of disconnecting connections that haven't had any traffic pass over them in a certain number of minutes. Sometimes this restriction can be a pain because, for instance, I can easily spend longer than ten minutes reading and then responding to a thoughtful message in Usenet news—all the time without sending any traffic. If you have problems with a too-short timeout value, try setting Eudora to check your email every few minutes to force some traffic to go over the connection.

(d) Pseudo Flat-Rate Accounts

A number of providers don't offer straight flat-rate plans, but instead offer flat rates up to a certain number of hours. So, you may pay $30 for 60 hours of use, or something similar. After that hourly limit, the provider usually charges a few dollars per hour. Again, this rate system is designed to make sure that some people don't abuse the system to the detriment of all the other users. If the provider that you're considering uses such a system, you may want to ask if there's any way you can check to see if you're close to the time limit. In addition, I recommend asking what the policy is on isolated incidents in which, say, some emergency happens and you have to leave the computer suddenly while it's still connected, and it's still connected 12 hours later when you can get back. Most good providers will simply credit you with the time if it's a one-time occurrence.

(d) Per-Hour Accounts

I seldom recommend accounts that charge you by the hour because I personally find it very stressful to be continually worrying about the clock ticking off dollars in the background while I'm working. However, per-hour accounts can make sense for people who don't use them often because the overall cost is lower than a flat-rate account's monthly fee. For instance, CompuServe used to use a pricing scheme of $2.50 per month and high hourly fees, and that's the sort of account I still have. Because I don't use CompuServe much, that pricing scheme is actually a lot cheaper for me than its current standard pricing plan, which costs $9.95 per month, even if you don't use it. If you

decide to go with a per-hour pricing plan, pay close attention to your bills so that you can tell if it makes sense to switch to a different type of account, assuming that's an option.

(d) Other Fees

The most common additional fee charged by Internet access providers is a startup fee that covers the costs of them adding you to their accounting system and setting up your account and all that. Startup fees also reduce the number of people who join for a month or two and then bail out. Most of the time, startup fees are in the $20 to $50 range. Since you only pay one startup fee, it's not a major wasy to differentiate between providers.

Although it's less common, some providers charge small amounts for file or email storage, such as $1 per megabyte per month. Since you wouldn't normally store files on the provider's host machine if you use a SLIP or PPP account, the main thing to watch out for is email, which is always stored on the provider's email server until you call in. The catch here is that it's possible to set some email programs to leave copies of the mail on the server, thus wasting space and potentially racking up charges. Only leave mail on the server if you know you need to retrieve it again from another machine.

Another reason that you may be charged for storage space is if your provider allows you to create your own Web page or anonymous FTP directory. If that's true, then you're getting some service for your money, so it should be easy to determine if the service is worth the charge. More on this later, since not all providers offer such services.

(d) Phone Charges

Many people don't think about phone charges properly, which leads to some confusion about how they interact with any fees charged by an Internet provider.

Almost everyone who wants to make an Internet connection using the software with this book along with a Mac and modem has a telephone connection that can make local calls for free (although this is less true in countries other than the U.S.). Thus, a local

telephone call won't add to your bill, which is the main reason why I always recommend that people work with an Internet provider that offers a local number.

*** Begin note***

Note

I'm assuming that you know the difference between a local call and a long distance call. Long distance calls don't have to cover a great distance, but if you can normally make local calls without worrying about per minute charges, any call that has per minute charges is by definition a long distance call.

*** End note ***

Recently, and this will continue to be even more true in the future, some national Internet providers have sprung up, offering Internet access via existing national or international networks, like the CompuServe Packet Network and SprintNet, both of which have many local numbers around the world. This means that even though you don't pay for the telephone call (a good thing), you usually pay an extra per-hour charge to the Internet provider. The provider then passes this charge on to the company, CompuServe or Sprint, that provides the network. As a result, national providers almost always have some kind of per-hour component to their rate systems. You should make sure that it's a good deal for you before taking it, especially if the per-hour charge is higher than you would pay calling long distance to a provider with a cheaper rate system—of course, the best arrangement is a cheap flat rate with no charge for the phone call. Also, even though you can call a local number to access a national Internet provider, that provider's offices probably aren't anywhere near you, which may make getting support more difficult. I also like to support local businesses.

Many people live where they can't call an Internet provider locally, nor can they call one of the packet-switched networks locally. What to do? Well, there are two basic choices. First, break down and make that long-distance call to an Internet provider that otherwise has good rates and policies. Second, check out Internet providers that offer connections via 800 numbers. Let's look at these two options in detail.

(e) Long Distance

Racking up huge long-distance bills goes against the grain for many of us, myself included, partly because when I was growing up it was long distance to call just about anyone we knew. However, now that there's plenty of competition in the long-distance market, you can choose a long-distance company that provides the best package for the way you call.

If you just have some basic deal with the long-distance company, it may cost as much as 25¢ per minute, depending on the time of day that you call. However, if you sign up for one of the special calling plans, you can significantly reduce that per-minute charge. For instance, MCI offers a Friends and Family plan that gives a 20 percent discount on calls that you make after 5:00 P.M. and on weekends, or something like that. If the number you're calling also is an MCI customer (many providers set up specific numbers for this purpose), then you get a 40 percent discount. In addition, MCI reportedly has a Best Friends program that gives you a 40 percent discount on any one number. Sprint and AT&T undoubtedly have comparable plans, but because the details vary greatly and since the plans tend to change frequently, you should call to find out what would be best for you. In addition, small long-distance companies have sprung up that offer creative and inexpensive packages. Check your Yellow Pages for a list of the less well-known long-distance providers in your area and compare their prices along with those from the big guys. I've collected some phone numbers in Table 11.1.

Table 11.1

Long Distance Telephone Company Customer Service Numbers

Company	Customer Service Number
AT&T	800-222-0300
MCI	800-950-5555
Sprint	800-877-4000

In talking with the support people at my provider, Northwest Nexus, I gather that some Northwest Nexus customers have managed to get long-distance telephone rates as low as 7¢ per minute, or $4.20 per hour. It may not be possible for you to get exactly the same rates, so figure out what the best per-minute

charge you can get is, and then multiply that by 60 to find the per-hour charge. Keep that charge in mind, since you'll want to compare it to the alternative, calling an 800 number.

*** Begin Note ***

Note

One advantage of calling long-distance is that with phone charges more or less the same no matter which Internet provider you choose, you can pick any provider in the country. That enables you to base your decision on variables other than cost, such as support, reliability, and other services.

*** End Note ***

(e) 800 Numbers

Numbers beginning with the prefix 800 deceive many people because, as we all know, calling an 800 number is free, right? Well, no. When you call an 800 number, any 800 number, the phone company bills the company on the other end just as they would bill you for a long-distance charge. In other words, an 800 number is merely a way of reversing the charges.

If you're calling a tech support number or ordering something from a mail-order company, you probably never see that charge. The company in question merely absorbs it as a cost of doing business and adds it to the overall pricing structure. However, when you call an 800 number to connect to an Internet provider, the Internet provider passes the cost right back to you in the form of a per-hour charge.

There's nothing wrong with this mechanism, but you shouldn't pretend that there's anything different about it compared with a long-distance call. Either way, the telephone company makes money for each minute that you stay online. The only difference is that with a long-distance call, you pay the phone company directly; with an 800 number, you pay the Internet provider, who then pays the phone company.

The problem comes in the rates. It's pretty easy to get discount rates around 10¢ per minute ($6.00 per hour), and as I noted

previously, some people have gotten as low as 7¢ per minute ($4.20 per hour). The lowest I've seen an Internet provider go on an 800 number is $5.50 per hour, and frankly, I don't know how that provider, DataBank, Inc. (**info@databank.com**) does it, since everyone else charges between $8 and $12 per hour.

All I'm saying here is that you should assemble as much comparative information as you can before you decide what is or is not the best deal for you. I cannot tell you what's cheapest because I don't know what all the variables are for you—which long-distance company and calling plan you use, whether it's cheaper or more expensive to call long-distance within your state, and so on.

(c) Service

In some ways, making the decision of which provider to use based on cost alone is simple. You figure out the salient numbers, add them all up, and try to determine what your monthly bill will look like. End of story, assuming that one provider stands out over others. But what if cost isn't the deciding factor? What if you discover that there are three providers in your area, and they all charge about the same amount (which wouldn't be surprising, given the demands of local competition in our capitalistic society). That's when you have to choose based on services. As I said above, I'm assuming here that all the providers you've narrowed your choice to support PPP or SLIP so you can use MacTCP-based applications. So what differentiates providers? Reliability (and its cohorts, accessibility and support) and special services such as personal Web pages and custom domain names.

(d) Reliability, Accessibility, and Support

These three topics fit together quite closely and are inherently related to how important a given Internet provider thinks its customers are. If a provider wants to concentrate on doing the best possible job for the customer, none of these three should ever be a problem. But in the real world, trade-offs are made, and in

my experience you sometimes get what you pay for in terms of reliability, accessibility, and support.

Just the other day I corresponded with someone who was having all sorts of problems with his account. I couldn't see anything wrong in what he was doing, so I recommended he try another provider that might do things differently. He got an account with the other provider, and everything worked on the first try. I pass on this anecdote because I want to you to realize that you don't have to put up with a lousy provider, for whatever reason. You can always switch to a different one (although of course, then you must go through the decision process of which one to pick again, but hey, you can't have everything!).

(e) Reliability

Reliability is a simple issue, but it's hard to determine before signing up. Do the provider's machines crash often, and if they do crash, does the provider lose email? Can you almost always connect to the outside Internet (sometimes such connection problems aren't your provider's fault, but lie further downstream)? Can you post a message to Usenet news and be sure that it will make it out to the rest of the world?

These are just a few of the questions that you should periodically ask yourself when you're working with a provider. You can't know this information beforehand, except perhaps from talking to an existing customer, and the provider certainly won't tell you if its setup is unreliable. But problems happen, and if they aren't fixed promptly and properly, it's tremendously frustrating. The last thing you want to do is start using a provider in your home-based business, say, and then find out that because of a technical glitch all the email to your account bounced for a week while you were on vacation.

(e) Accessibility

Although it may seem as though I covered accessibility previously, I'm thinking of a more specific issue. This is a simple question. Can you almost always get through to your provider's modems whenever you want to? There's nothing worse than getting a busy signal for hours on end, even with automatic redial.

And it's even worse when your provider has bad modems that just ring and ring and ring and[el]

Busy signals are a fact of life with any provider. The reason is simple. No provider could possibly afford to have one modem and one phone per customer without charging exorbitant rates. Every provider tries to maintain a balance, then, between the number of customers and the number of modems and phone lines. This balance requires that you get busy signals occasionally when you call at the busiest times of night, for instance, after dinner. Otherwise, the provider would be paying for phone lines and modems that would sit unused for the rest of the day—an obvious waste of money.

As providers grow, they must continually add modems and phone lines, and sometimes it can take the phone company a week longer than expected to fill the order for more phone lines. Thus, it's acceptable for a provider to have even bad busy signal problems as long as it's only for a short period of time and those phone lines are on order. If busy signals are a chronic problem, especially at odd times of the day, get a different provider. You can't learn to live on the Internet if you have to spend 30 minutes waiting for a free modem.

(e) Support

Finally, let's face it. The world is not a perfect place, and problems occur. Heck, they occur all the time. But what's important is that the provider will go out of its way to fix the problems promptly, help you when you send email or call, and generally is responsive and responsible.

Technical support is a tremendously hard and stressful job, so not all providers have equally good support staffs, but a provider that wants happy customers will make sure to hire quality support folks.

Another thing to check for is a provider that will inform its customers of known downtime through a mailing list, newsgroup, or login message. It's not nearly as big a deal to not use your account if you know in advance that you can't do so between 12:00 and 1:00 in the afternoon on a specific day.

Finally, if you're using a national provider, you should check on the hours it offers tech support, just in case you happen to be on

the opposite coast and can't get support when you may need it. In my experience, local providers generally offer more accessible and better support, perhaps in part because they're not attempting to serve so many people from so many places.

(d) Special Services

It's hard for me to anticipate what sort of special services an Internet provider might offer, but here are a few that I've seen in the past. In my experience, a smaller, local provider is more likely to be flexible enough to offer these sorts of special services than a large national provider (although exceptions certainly exist in both directions).

(e) Custom Domain Names

Many people prefer to have a custom domain name instead of the name of the provider's domain, and some providers can help you get such a name. You can't just pick any name, such as **ibm.com** because most of the obvious ones have already been taken, but some providers can search for free names from your list and apply for the name for you. Then, unless you get a dedicated connection or move to another provider, that domain name points to your provider's computers.

It's often easier for providers to give out domain names under their domain. So for instance, Northwest Nexus controls the **wa.com** domain, and can provide domain names under that domain (which is merely an alias to another machine) quite easily. My friend Bill got his domain name, **beer.wa.com**, that way. These subdomain names are easier to get because the provider doesn't have to ask the InterNIC for them, but they also aren't portable to another provider.

(e) Personal Web Pages

In this day and age of the World Wide Web, it seems that everyone wants to have his or her own Web page. It's not that hard to create one in HTML (in fact, I'll show you how in chapter 26), but finding a server that will carry it can be a bit difficult. This is another area in which good Internet providers can

distinguish themselves. Some may charge a small monthly fee for such a service, but it may be well worth the cost, depending on how badly you want your own Web page.

(e) Personal FTP Directory

As with personal Web pages, it can be handy to have a directory on an anonymous FTP server if you want to put files there for anyone in the world to retrieve. Some providers offer this, and as with the Web pages, some charge extra.

(e) Email Aliases

Although many providers would ask you to get two accounts if you want to let your spouse or children use the Internet on their own, some providers can set up email aliases if you just want to have another email address that comes into the same mailbox as your standard address. So, for instance, you may have your personal account and have a company name email address that is an alias to your personal account.

(e) New Connection Methods

ISDN (Integrated Services Digital Network—a digital phone line) may not be as widespread as everyone would like, and in some areas it can be both hard to find and expensive when you do find it. But, if you can get an ISDN connection to your house for a reasonable rate, it would be good if your Internet provider supported it. The same goes for new modem standards, cable modems, and the like. Is your provider going to keep up with new technology so you can connect to the Internet at the fastest possible speed?

Similarly, although this isn't that important right away, if you decide to move up to a dedicated connection via a frame relay 56K line, for instance, can your provider help you? If so, that makes the move much easier than if you have to find a new provider for your dedicated connection.

(e) Custom Information

Most Internet providers concentrate on providing access to the Internet rather than providing information on the Internet, but many of them also put together Web pages about events or issues of local interest. I don't consider this a major reason to go with one provider over another, since you can generally get to any such public site, but it may be worth supporting if you find the information truly useful.

(e) Business Services

What if you want to set up a small mailing list or run a Gopher server or something like that, but you don't want to get your own dedicated connection? Some providers offer this sort of service, although always with additional charges. If you're considering using the Internet as a business tool but aren't interested in running your own machine to do so, you might ask around about what sorts of services your provider can give you.

(c) Taking the Plunge

I hope this discussion has given you the information that you need to make an informed choice among the many different Internet service providers out there. Check out appendix A, "*Internet Starter Kit* Providers," for a list of providers that you can easily use with the custom installation options included on the disk, and appendix B, "Providers of Commercial Internet Access," for a much larger list of providers and their contact information.

The providers listed in appendix A, "*Internet Starter Kit* Providers," will be easier to work with than the ones listed in appendix B, "Providers of Commercial Internet Access," if only because we've included configuration files on the disk for those listed in appendix A. In addition, they have agreed to give *Internet Starter Kit* readers specials deals on their services.

Even if you've decided to get a full Internet account, many people also have accounts on the commercial services, and that's where I turn my attention in the next chapter.