

TECH-TALK!

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HAVE YOU IM'd TODAY?

In previous TECH-Talk articles, this author has generally and specifically referred to the concept of Instant Messaging (IM). The reference came up in a variety of venues from alternates to E-mail to instant gratification of communication and on to the avoidance of Spam and E-mail virus attacks. While it is hoped that this author truly has not become a victim of the "instant gratification communication syndrome" (it appears that the option is indeed inviting), he also is for avoiding Spam & E-mail virus attacks at the same time. In addition, the thought of being able to get answers to important questions in a matter of seconds (while at your computer) without waiting for email to be sent and received is a nice prospect.

Instant messaging, simply put, is a two-way (alternating) "inter-active" conversation tool that can be utilized both socially (friends & family) and throughout the business environment. It can be voiceless (typed messages) or it can be used verbally depending on the software chosen and your intent on purchasing a headset that works with your computer. But for now, this article will deal with the written or non-verbal standard format. In its present state, IM is pretty much a pop-up-add free, virus free, Spam free and basically free of charge software product for the individual and small business user. More sophisticated pricey enterprise versions are out and are coming out as you read this article, but that is jumping too far ahead and this will be left for a future article.

To get started maybe the best option is to list the four most common basic software packages available:

AOL Instant Messenger V. 5.1	(http://www.aim.com)
Microsoft MSN Messenger V 8	(http://www.msn.com)
Microsoft NetMeeting V. 3.01	(http://www.microsoft.com/windows/netmeeting/default.asp)
Yahoo Messenger V. 5.5	(http://messenger.yahoo.com)

AOL users or users of a Netscape Browser will find that the Instant Messenger is already installed in your computer. By following the installation wizard instructions, this program can be easily put in place & made operational for you. If you can not find it in your computer it can be easily downloaded from its above referenced Web Site.

Most computers using Microsoft operating system software already have MSN Messenger Service & NetMeeting installed and it's just a matter of setting it up by following the installation wizards. If for some reason you do not have it in your computer it too can be downloaded from its above referenced Web Sites.

Yahoo Messenger is most likely not in your computer or in your operating system software. It may have to be downloaded from the Yahoo Web Site and then installed following the installation wizard instructions from its above referenced Web Site.

Since the inception of the instant messaging concept, the most commonly used software has been the AOL Instant Messenger product. Both the AOL and Yahoo products are similar and it is probably a toss-up (think user preference) as to which one is better. Microsoft's MSN Messenger while similar to AOL & Yahoo, is more intensely linked to Microsoft's on-line access and services. Microsoft's NetMeeting product on the other hand goes well beyond the concept of IM and is considerably different. It includes conferencing, chat, whiteboards, file transfers, video imaging, shared applications and collaboration in addition to the MSN Messenger IM product. It probably does not compare in general widespread use as do the AOL & Yahoo products and probably is not the best place to start for those new to IM.

The point of this boils down to how to choose an IM product. Since you can only communicate with others in the same IM program (you can't cross-communicate among the various products just yet) it probably would be best to make your choice based the majority of people with whom you will be communicating and the software that they are using. On the other hand, if you are starting out with a group of people who do not currently use IM software then the choice is again based on individual preferences. You could of course set up IM in multiple products and run separate lists if you so desire. It is this author's suggestion that you start with one program and then once familiar with the basic operation, it will be a short jump to move on to a second one if that is your intention.

This then brings us to the question, how do I get started? For openers, realize that for IM software to work, you **MUST be connected to the Internet**. All of these programs work via transmission of your communications using the Internet as the vehicle of transport. Soooooooooooooo, if you do not have an Internet connection you must either get one or forget about using this technology. The GCPA has provided for an Internet access agreement just for our members via our ISP as indicated at the end of this article.

Assuming that this Internet connection has been established, the next task is to set-up the program of choice. Once you have downloaded or installed the IM software, the first thing you will be asked to do is to create a user or Log-On name. At the same time you also will be asked to create a password. Like most other privacy-based programs, the installation wizard will walk you through these steps. If your user name or password are currently in use it will so prompt you and ask that you make another choice(s) until you get one that is not in use. This all happens rather quickly and is much easier done than said. **Be sure to write down and protect you final user or Log-On name and password**. While the program saves your user or Log-On name you will need your password to access sign-on and thus your ability to communicate. There is also an option for your computer to remember your password, but that will leave your computer open for anyone else to use your identity (think security).

After getting your user or Log-On name and password approved, your machine will automatically set you up to sign-on. You now will have the ability to create groups; i.e., Friends, Family, Social and Business groups. If you chose a user or Log-On name that is "coded" or not easily identifiable, then you may want to let others know your user or Log-On name much the way you give out your E-mail address to those with whom you wish to connect. At this stage you may also customize or personalize your software. There is generally a help section as well as a tour section. Each of these programs will guide you through getting familiar, getting started & customizing your screen; they are indeed helpful tools and should be utilized, especially for those new to IM.

These are the basics to the background of IM and the simple choices for getting started. The programs are pretty user-friendly and there are a host of folks using them that can help you if you get stuck. For the price (think FREE) it is a pretty good deal and a great way to communicate quickly with others that are also "on-line".

Since IM has been suggested as a communication device, this author will be setting up an IM group for the GCPA members. It will be open to all members of GCPA including Distributors, Suppliers & Multi-line Reps. It can be used as a forum for discussion topics, as a question & answer vehicle and as plain old "water cooler" conversation. This will be your opportunity to ask and receive as well as communicate with each other. The GCPA ISP (Internet Service Provider) will NOT monitor this group, but **the conversations will be visible to ANYONE that is signed-on at the time of the conversation.** So common courtesy, good sense and respect for others should be your guidelines; e.g., think twice, type once before sending. The group will be called GCPA and will be on the AOL Instant Messaging program. **If you choose to participate make sure that you set up a new separate group called GCPA.** If you wish to connect with me for my Log-On name please E-mail me (newman@flite.net) and I will provide my Log-On name for you. Please provide me with yours at the same time so that I may recognize you when you log-on. Remember that **this only works when you & others are connected to the Internet AND when you open your IM program and are signed-on.** It is easy to tell who is signed-on at the time you connect. There is a list of others who are "on-line" which is easily seen. Let's give it a try and see if it works for our group. Who will be the first to get setup and sign-on with me?

Down the road, if it works for you in this group, you may want to set up a group for your customers and prospects or your vendors to answer questions, increase inquiries or to expedite orders. The possibilities for use are only limited by your desire to utilize this technology.

Keep thinking about how you can communicate with each other or with suppliers and multi-line reps and vice versa. It is indeed a quick way to get a question answered without being put on hold, into voice-mail or waiting for an E-mail response. It is a good business tool that can be used both inside and outside your business walls if it is used effectively. Maybe in the near future you will be able to answer yes to the question, **HAVE YOU IM'd TODAY?**

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