January 2012
IN THIS ISSUE

FAMILY TREE: SPECIAL OFFER! For a discount on *Family Tree Made Easy*, see p29

WEBWISE: PASSPORT The quick and easy way to renew your passport online (p40)

INVESTIGATION Do cash-for-laptop schemes offer a good deal? (p8)

SECURITY SOFTWARE The best suites to ensure your computer is safe (p46)

FROM THE EDITOR

Technology's great, isn't it? Well, it is when it works. When the PC gremlins strike, I confess it makes my blood boil. This issue, we're showing you how to blast those gremlins with top tips on fixing your computer (*p22*). You can also read your technical Q&As (*p12*).

Of course, prevention is better than cure and your best defence is to ensure you have excellent security. Turn to *p46* for our test on paid-for security suites. Or for free solutions, see *p18*.

Another bugbear of mine is tracking down lost files. Our guide to organising your files makes it easy to keep your computer in order (*p30*).

We've also increased our Jargon buster from one to two pages, so there's even more help debunking PC jargon (*p66*).

Technical issues are one thing, but many of you contact us when you're having consumer issues with companies. We're helping to resolve these too (see Which? works for you, *p64*). And, if you need help, please email us at **computing@which.co.uk**. ∎

Sarah Kidner
EDITOR
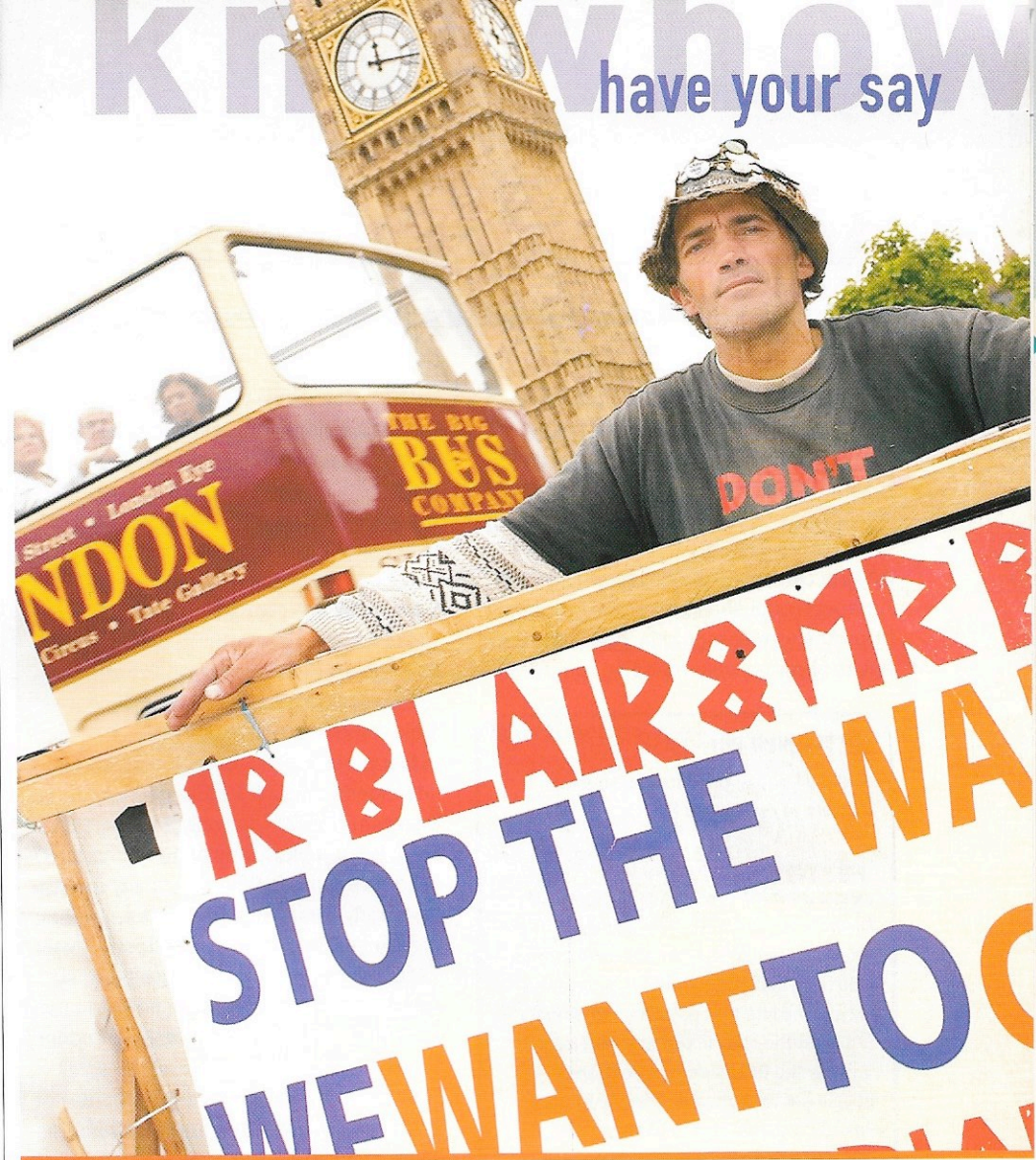
Campaign from your home using the power of the web

SarahK@which.net

Peace protester, Brian Haw, has been keeping a one-man vigil outside the Houses of Parliament for more than two years. He sleeps on the pavement, surrounded by anti-war banners, and wears a 'Stop the War' T-shirt and a hat plastered in political badges.

Armed with only a megaphone, the former merchant seaman and father of seven has become a thorn in Tony Blair's side. But in spite of numerous attempts to move Brian on, he is now almost as much a part of the Westminster scenery as the House itself.

SPEAKERS' CORNER

WAR ON THE WEB

You needn't go to such extremes to get your message across. As Marie Griffiths found in her attempt to get Dixons to repair her television (see 'Consumer victory', p24), the web can be the perfect campaigning tool. It's also a great way to mobilise support for your plans.

Power to the people

Weblogs or 'blogs' are the 21st Century equivalent of a diary. These online accounts of one person's experience are a powerful way to highlight a cause.

During the war with Iraq, one man's online diary highlighted the plight of the Iraqi people. Salam Pax, alias the 'Blogger of Baghdad', became a cyber-celebrity for his www.dear*raed.blogspot.com, which documented everyday life under Saddam Hussein. The web afforded Salam the anonymity to write under Saddam's oppressive regime – in fact, his identity was so well hidden it was rumoured he didn't really exist. The Guardian dispelled that myth when it tracked him down and persuaded him to write for the paper.

The web was also crucial in mobilising public demonstrations against the war. 'It saved us a lot of work because we could

This website helped spread the word about the 'Stop the War' demonstrations in February

give people information on how to get to the February 15 [2003] demonstrations,' said Ghada Razuki, who runs the national office for www.stopthewar.org.uk.

WEB UPRISING

Whether you're a lone voice like Salam Pax or a global pressure group, the web can help you to fight your cause. The web is an effective tool for campaigners because it's immediate, it's inexpensive to use, and it doesn't require a great deal of technical knowledge, even if you choose to set up a website to publicise your concerns. 'The internet gives you the same level of voice as everyone else,' said Susie Wright, Web Manager for Amnesty International (www.amnesty.org).

Read on to find out how to mobilise the power of blogs, websites, email lists, user groups and forums.

Armchair activist

Find out how to set up a web diary or mobilise your MP

There's plenty of action you can take without leaving the comfort of your swivel chair.

DIGITAL DIARY

Anyone can set up a weblog: a homeless American published his renowned blog http://thehomelessguy.blogspot.com from public libraries while sleeping rough.

MP LOBBIED WITH EASE

Rodney Morgan used the Faxyourmp website to contact his MP

Rodney belongs to a group that raises awareness of Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy System (RSDS – a stress-related nervous disorder affecting soldiers who have suffered a trauma). 'I used the faxyourmp site to contact my MP, Angela Smith, at the start of the war with Iraq.

'I wanted to ensure that no more people got the condition than necessary. Faxyourmp was easy to use – you don't even have to know who your MP is, let alone their fax number.

'Two weeks after using the site, I received an acknowledgement from Angela Smith, and I've since had a full response assuring me that the MoD is aware of the risk of RSDS.'

Rodney Morgan found the faxyourmp website easy to use
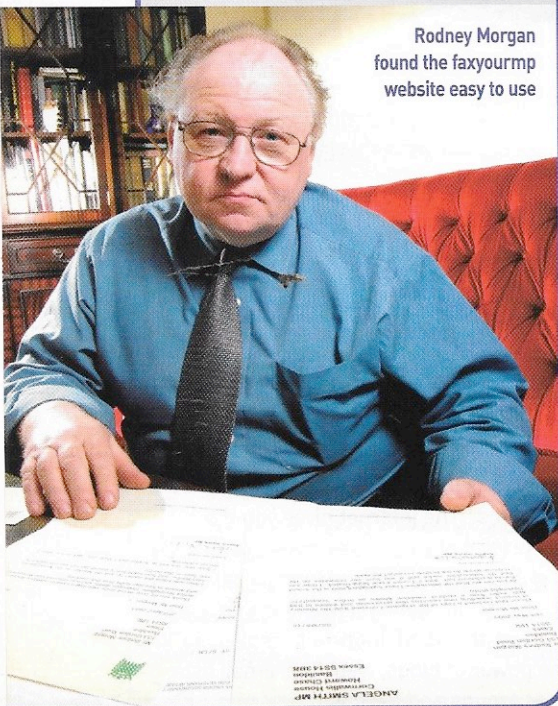
If you don't have your own website or domain name, there are various sites that will host your blog free of charge. Blogger (www.blogger.com), Livejournal (www.livejournal.com) and Pitas (www.pitas.com) are three popular sites.

Consumer victory

Blogs can be a powerful tool. Marie Griffiths used hers to score a consumer victory over retail giant Dixons when it took months to repair her television.

Marie bought the 32-inch, widescreen 'Manager's Special' TV for £250 in December 2002. After only a week, a bulb blew, but it took Dixons two months to send an engineer. When he finally arrived, he merely confirmed that the television was, in fact, broken and then took it away.

'One of my colleagues suggested that I start a weblog. I really wanted to tell my story because I felt I had been ignored for months,' said Marie.

So she emailed technology website The Register (www.theregister.co.uk) to get publicity for her site. 'A journalist from The Register rang me straightaway and the story was later picked up by The Guardian. As a result, I received about 140 emails. It seems to have struck a nerve with so many people,' she said.

Dixons returned Marie's working television in May 2003. A Dixons' spokesperson said: 'If someone has a poor service, they will share that with their friends. Traditionally, that has been in the pub or over the garden fence ... the internet is just an extension of that.'

'The message from my experience is don't give up until they finally listen to you,' Marie told us.

MOBILISE YOUR MP

If you haven't the time to keep a diary, why not get your MP to act for you? Website FaxYourMP enables you to email or fax your representative in a few mouse clicks. 'The web removes the inertia factor ... it is something that people can do without getting out of their armchair,' said Yoz Grahame, one of the volunteers who helps to run faxyourmp.com.

To contact your MP, go to the website and enter your postcode – the site will automatically display your MP's details.

How to set up a weblog

① **Set up your account** Go to www.blogger.com and, under the heading 'Create your own Blog!', click 'Start Now!'. To create your account you must enter a user name, your full name, email address and a password. Now sign in and click 'Create a New Blog.'

② **Public forum** Enter a brief description for your blog and decide whether you want it to be public or private. To campaign for a cause, you should click public so that others can read about your experiences. If you have your own domain name, you can host it there; if not, choose a name and host it at Blogspot.

③ **Creating your blog** Pick one of the six available design templates. Now simply enter your text into the window, click 'Post' then 'Publish'. Your blog is now live on the web.
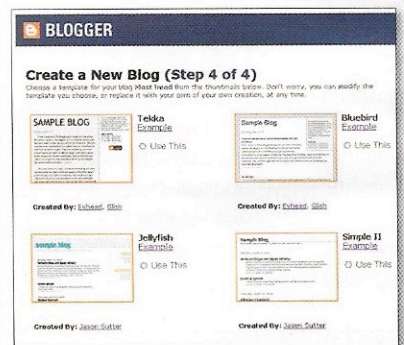
Enter your question and personal details in the template and preview your letter. If you're happy with it, click 'OK'. You will then receive an email asking you to confirm that you want to send your fax.

TIP To help you assess your chances of getting a reply, FaxYourMP publishes the results of its survey into the proportion of

Party politics

Campaigning in a group may be a better bet than going it alone

You can create an email list, web forum or discussion group to publicise your cause and attract supporters to it.

ENLISTING SUPPORT

Yahoo! Groups enables you to create your own email list. Getting enough people to use a new group can be hard work, especially as Yahoo! already lists 92 active groups under 'Issues and Causes'. Given this, it's a good idea to persuade a couple of friends to join your group from the start to get the discussions going.

Once your site is live on Yahoo! Groups, you need to 'grow' your list. One technique is to join groups in a similar subject area and promote your cause there. 'That's often how people "pollinate" groups. They also trade group emails with each other,' said Alick Mighall, Head of Production, Yahoo! UK & Ireland.

Once you've enlisted support, it's down to you to further your cause. 'Groups are only as effective as the people who use them,' said Alick.

Open forum

Yahoo! Groups are private in the sense that users need to register to post and view messages. By contrast, a forum is a public board where anyone can post messages and see the responses online. For example, BTOpenwoe (www.btopenwoe.co.uk/forums) highlights problems with BT's broadband services. 'It's an opportunity for people to share their experiences. A lot of people have solved problems by talking to others, so the site has evolved into a user community,' said site owner, Vince Wilton.

Together, we can

The BBC is set to launch a new website this autumn to promote this type of grassroots activism. Dubbed iCan, the site will, like forums and lists, put like-minded people in touch, and the emphasis will be on locally organised groups.

'It [iCan] will help people to manage their civic life online. It will work at a very local and quite granular level. For example, you'll be able to contact people if there are proposals for a new tram in your town or if the bins aren't being emptied on time,' said Sian Kevill, co-leader of the iCan project.

The BBC is planning to have a series of message boards, which will be organised by region. A pilot site will go live this autumn, with the full website due to launch early next year.

---

faxes replied to within 14 days (see www.faxyourmp.com/stats.php3). Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith was ranked bottom: he received 17 faxes, but responded to none of these within 14 days. Independent Conservative Andrew Hunter topped the league table: he replied within 14 days to all 29 of the enquiries he received.

A few MPs refuse to answer any faxes from FaxYourMP – we name them in the table at the foot of the page.

Petition power

If faxing your MP fails, why not target 'Number 10' with an electronic petition? The government accepts these as long as you follow its guidelines at www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page297.asp. This website also explains how and where to send your petition.

The petition must contain clear statements of what people who sign it are agreeing to, the full name and address of all signatories, and a closing date. It must then be submitted in one batch after the closing date.

Petition-Them

Alternatively, sites such as Petition-Them (www.petition-them.com) will host a petition for you, free of charge. The website covers topics from environmental issues to fair trade and employment, and has even featured a petition to free a monkey from a nightclub window.

'The internet is the perfect "shop window" for people to promote their cause and collect signatures,' said Roger Rowett, a Petition-Them spokesperson.

Which MPs refuse to accept faxes?

Below is a 'hall of shame' from the FaxYourMP website. It shows the MPs that refuse to accept faxes from FaxYourMP.

David Atkinson (Conservative)
Colin Burgon (Labour)
Eric Forth (Conservative)
Boris Johnson (Conservative)
Piara S. Khabra (Labour)
John Wilkinson (Conservative)

Enlist support through Yahoo! Groups

① **Join Yahoo! Groups**
Go to http://uk.dir.groups.yahoo.com and 'Click to Register'. Read and 'Accept' the terms and conditions, then fill in the registration form, choosing a user name. You will need to supply an alternative email address and click to 'verify' it is correct.

② **Pick a category** You want to attract like-minded people to your cause, so it's important you put your group in the right area of Yahoo! Groups. Groups are separated into different categories and sub-categories – to find 'Issues and Causes' (the activism area of Yahoo! Groups), look under 'Culture and Community'.

Select a category that is the most suitable match for your own campaign. For example, if we wanted to campaign against internet censorship, we would choose 'Civil Rights, Censorship'. Now click on the link 'Place my Group in Censorship.'

③ **Create a group** Enter a name, group email address and a description of your group, then click 'Continue'. Your group is now live on Yahoo! and you are free to invite members to join.

YAHOO! Groups
UK & Ireland

Welcome Guest
Yahoo! Groups

Sign in here | **What is a Group?**
New users | One email address & website that allows you to...
Click here to register | · Share photos & files, plan events, send a newsletter
Registered users | · Stay in touch with friends and family
Sign in! | · Discuss sports, health, current events, and more

Start a new Group!

DESIGNER LABELS

New technology that will track everything from baked beans to prescription medication is coming to a store near you. Find out what 'RFID' means for you

SarahK@which.co.uk

Picture this. You're at the supermarket. On your way to the checkout, a computerised scanner reads the contents of your trolley and tots up your bill so when you get there all you have to do is hand over your plastic. Meanwhile, the same scanner just informed head office that you bought the last tin of baked beans so they'll need to order more.

This is just one possible application of Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags – tiny, lightweight, inexpensive computer chips that can store and transmit information over radio waves. Conceived as a way of managing inventory, RFID tags make it possible to account for a product at any point in the supply chain from its manufacture to the time it's sold to you. Each product has its own electronic product code (EPC), which the chip transmits via a wireless antenna to RFID readers. More sophisticated RFID tags can even monitor a product's condition or environment; if a refrigerated van's temperature rises above -18°C, say, RFID tags on the ice-cream tubs inside will radio back to base, so the problem can be rectified before the ice-cream spoils.

IDENTITY CHECK

British retailers including Tesco and Marks & Spencer are keen to adopt RFID. More accurate product tracking allows stores to minimise stockpiling, plus there's less chance of it 'falling off the back of a lorry' – both factors that will cut store overheads. RFID also makes it easier for stores to know where goods are. During recent trials in Tesco stores at Leicester and Sandhurst, 'a customer came in asking for the complete James Bond collection. We could tell what DVDs were on the shelf and which were out the back of the store. We found all of the DVDs within three to four minutes,' says Colin Cobain, director of IT for Tesco stores.

> **❛ It [RFID] is an internet of things ❜**

The Vatican is using RFID chips to tag its vast library of over two million books. 'When one book gets put in the wrong place it's as if it's gone for good,' says vice prefect Ambrogio Piazzoni. The tags hold details about the book's author, number of pages and the publication date. In future, the Vatican hopes to track how often books come off the shelves so it can archive those that aren't used.

Smarter tags

Future mobile phones could also be enabled to act as RFID-readers. Say you're out and about and see a poster advertising a film; by using your phone to read the poster's RFID tag, you'd be able to get details of where it was showing and even book a ticket. 'You could easily... dial (numbers) or send messages, just by touching smart objects, in this case, RFID tags. The phone will

read the content of the smart object, and translate it to an action,' says Gerhard Romen, head of market development at Nokia.

PHARMACY COUNTER

Tagging could help combat fraud, too. America's Food and Drugs Administration (FDA) is looking to RFID tags to stem the flow of counterfeit and illegal prescription medications – a massive, global problem. In June, the FDA recalled 130,000 bottles of fake Lipitor (a prescription cholesterol-control medication). RFID tags will help to keep track of pharmaceutical products which can 'change hands up to thirty times' as 'they move from wholesalers to retail outlets and back again' says Ian Rhodes, a consultant for PA Consulting, which represents a number of large pharmaceutical companies. 'It [RFID] creates a line of communication between the manufacturer and patient and makes it easy for the patient to authenticate their medicine.'

It's even rumoured that the European Central Bank is working on a project to embed RFID tags into euro bank notes by 2005 to combat money laundering.

Tag, you're it!

There are privacy concerns around RFID, however. Some campaigning groups claim the unique code used by RFID tags will enable retailers to build up a detailed profile of what and how much you buy, where and when. This isn't possible with bar codes as every can of Coke, say, has the same code (a can of Coke bought in London looks the same to a bar code scanner as one in Bristol). By contrast, an RFID tag can identify the exact can of coke that you buy, and, if you pay with a credit card or use a loyalty card, that information could be linked to your profile. 'RFID would enable

stores to identify who is a valuable customer and who is not...I've read of plans to use RFID-laced loyalty cards and to set individual prices for customers,' says Katherine Albrecht, director of the US-based organisation, Consumers against supermarket privacy invasion and numbering (CASPIAN).

CASPIAN (www.nocards.org) is also concerned that RFID tags will be scanned indiscriminately by companies and used for marketing purposes. 'People can read RFID tags from a distance, right through your clothes, wallet, backpack or purse, without your knowledge or consent, as long as they have the right device. In a way, it gives strangers x-ray vision powers to spy on you; to identify both you and the things you're wearing and carrying,' says Albrecht.

Gillette, which already uses RFID tags on its razors, maintains that it only tags goods at palette level and not individually. 'It isn't cost-effective to tag individual razors and blades,' said Gillette. Inevitably, however, the cost of the technology will come down.

'Once the tags get down to a few cents apiece or less, companies like Gillette and Procter & Gamble have publicly said they're eager to use them on all of their products,' says CASPIAN, which runs the Boycott Gillette (www.boycottgillette.com) and Boycott Benetton (http://boycottbenetton.org) websites.
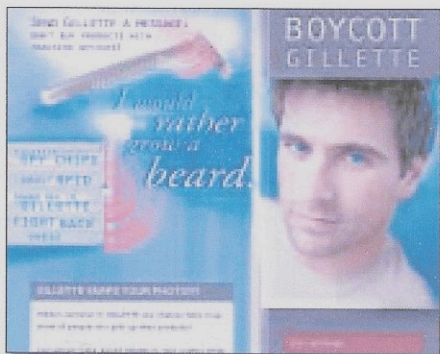
Surreptitiously tagging what you buy is illegal under the current Data Protection Act, according to the Information Commissioners' Office (ICO). 'The idea that retailers are going to use RFID as a mass tracking device simply does not hold water. Retailers would not be able to keep that kind of thing secret,' says Elizabeth Dunn, a compliance manager at the ICO. EPCGlobal says it has already

drawn up a code of practice for the use of RFID and the electronic product code, stating that manufacturers must make it clear if an item contains an RFID chip.

BLOCKING TACTICS

Is it possible for RFID supporters and privacy groups to reach a compromise? 'There are those who are keen to reap the benefits of RFID and those who have privacy concerns. We believe there's a middle ground,' says Burt Kaliski, of RSA Labs in Europe which is developing security options for RFID.

He believes the answer lies in the technology itself. One option is to deactivate RFID tags at the checkout (a bit like the electronic security tags that already exist on high-value items).

Alternatively, the customer could use a 'Blocker Tag' invented at RSA Labs. Based on the same technology as RFID tags, Blocker Tags interfere with any attempt by an RFID reader to access information stored on an RFID

chip. The idea is that a Blocker Tag could be attached to a bag so that when you put tagged goods in it, it stops unauthorised readers from scanning them. 'It is like placing an invisibility cloak around the item,' says Kaliski. Blocker Tags would not, however, offer protection if you were trying to smuggle items out of the shop without paying.

Bill Allen, a spokesperson for

> **'RFID tags can be read from a distance...by anybody with the right reader. In a way, it gives strangers x-ray vision powers to spy on you'**
>
> Katherine Albrecht, director of Consumers against supermarket privacy invasion and numbering (CASPIAN)

chip manufacturer, Texas Instruments, offers a less hi-tech solution. 'A simple pair of scissors can prove very effective in disabling a tag. You can kill the tag by cutting across the antenna,' he says.

Verdict RFID tags present some exciting possibilities. Less time at the supermarket checkout, fewer empty shelves, smart payment systems and the security of knowing your prescription medication is kosher. Some supporters are even looking to fit RFID readers into next generation washing machines enabling them to read the washing instructions on tagged clothes and put the machine on the correct wash. It could even alert you if you've inadvertently popped a red sock in with your white wash!

But, for RFID to gain widespread acceptance, stores must be open about how and where they're using them and give customers the option to disable or remove the tags at the point of sale. That way, if you take off the tag that tells your washing machine 'I'm a red sock' before you leave the store, you might end up with dyed pink knickers, but at least it will be your choice.

stop sending me stupid emails!!
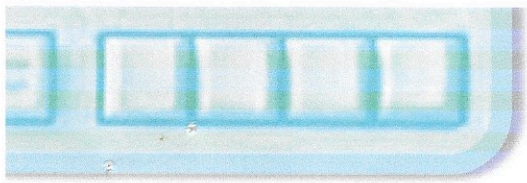
Follow our tips to avoid falling for – and forwarding – hoaxes, myths and frauds

SarahK@which.net

What if you could claim a share of $20 million just for handing over your bank account details? It's a tempting offer – one that sucks in an estimated one per cent of those who receive an email from conmen claiming to need help getting money out of other countries. Victims lose an average of £31,000 in these 'advanced fee frauds', according to the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS), which estimates the total loss at around £150 million over the past three years.

You might think you're too clever to fall for this. But how about the 'expensive phone call' email that warns people to be on the lookout for a bogus caller – a well-dressed woman who comes to your door asking for help? As she's broken down and wants to call her husband, you agree. But she has previously set up a £50 a minute premium-rate number, which she calls from your phone. The first you know about it is when you receive the £250 bill.

Would you pass on this warning? It's not true, of course. But Corby's PC Toseland warned local firms of the scam, lending it credibility. 'It was very embarrassing for us. It took time that could have been better spent on operational policing,' admitted a Northamptonshire Police spokesperson. A simple call to ICSTIS, which regulates premium numbers, would have revealed that the maximum allowed charge is £1.50 a minute – not £50.

FOOL'S PARADISE

These frauds and urban myths are just two of the many hoaxes currently circumnavigating the web. Others promise (among other things) a share in Bill Gates' fortune, or warn you to delete essential files from your computer.

Emails like the advanced fee fraud carry a heavy payload. 'This sort of sting is a definite threat to both company viability and individual security. Some [victims] are known to have been suicidal when they realise they have been duped into parting with thousands of pounds,'

said a spokesperson for NCIS. Virus hoaxes, too, cause widespread disruption – anti-virus company Sophos gets more calls about hoaxes than the real thing.

'There is something about an email, which arrives at your desktop, that gives it gravitas. [Whereas] if a person smelling of schnapps sits next to you on a train and tries to convince you of something you think "this is a little bit odd",' said Graham Cluley, senior technology consultant at Sophos.

Fortunately, most hoaxes contain 'signatures' or calling cards that tend to give them away. In this feature, we'll tell you the telltale signs to look for so that, this April Fool's Day, you can ensure the joke won't be on you.

FORWARD THINKING

Before you pass on a virus warning, check:
McAfee vil.mcafee.com/hoax.asp
Sophos www.sophos.com/virusinfo/hoaxes
Symantec securityresponse.symantec.com/avcenter/hoax.html

And for possible myths or frauds, see:
Urban Legends urbanlegends.about.com
Vmyths www.vmyths.com

Virus warnings

Virus hoaxes, like the real thing, play on our genuine fears – the 'Budweiser Frogs' hoax, for example. In the 1990s, Budweiser posted a popular screen saver that featured its infamous frogs on its website.

Soon afterwards an email began circulating that claimed that the download contained a virus that could crash your hard drive. 'If you download it, you will lose everything!!! Your hard drive will crash!!! DON'T DOWNLOAD THIS UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES!!!... PLEASE DISTRIBUTE THIS TO AS MANY PEOPLE AS POSSIBLE...,' read the alert.
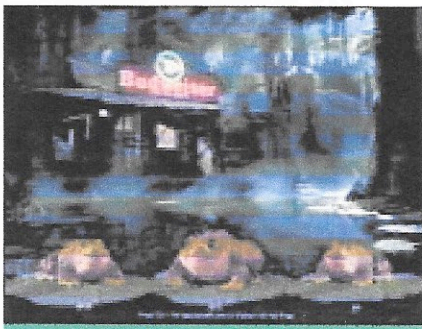
One of the earliest hoaxes claimed the Budweiser screensaver would make your hard drive croak

The phrase 'distribute this to as many people as possible' caused havoc. Melissa, a genuine virus, mails itself to the first 50 people in your address book – and by passing on hoax emails you're effectively acting the same way.

'There is an [incorrect] email going around about the "trophy rapist" saying that the police want people to send an e-fit to as many people as possible. People send it on so in some ways it exhibits the same properties as a virus,' said Sophos anti-virus expert, Graham Cluley.

DELETE THIS FILE

Other virus hoaxes such as JDBGMGR (pronounced JD, BG Mudger), even manage to convince people to crash their own machines. JDBGMGR was one of 2002's most prolific hoaxes, according to Sophos. A widely circulated email claimed that MSN Messenger was spreading a virus that installed a file on your computer called jdbgmgr.exe and symbolised by a teddy bear. The email includes instructions on how to search for the file on your own computer, advising you to delete it should you find it.

In reality, the file is a Java Debugger Manager and forms part of the Windows

Despite its teddy bear icon, jdbgmgr.exe is a needed system file – don't fall for the virus hoax and delete it

operating system. If you follow the email's instructions and delete it, you may be unable to run some Java-based programs. A similar hoax urges you to delete a file called Sulfnbk.exe, which supports long file names within Windows.

MARKS OF A HOAX

There are several methods to spot a virus hoax from a genuine alert. Sophos's Cluley jokes that 'if there are a lot of capital letters and exclamation marks then don't believe it is a genuine virus alert'. The formatting of the Budweiser Frogs email confirms that many a true word is, indeed, spoken in jest.

Hoax warnings (unlike the real thing) tend to claim that existing anti-virus programs are unable to detect the virus.

Another trick commonly used by the hoax writers is to give themselves credibility by association with known anti-virus companies. 'They say, for example, that Symantec has issued an alert or is warning people about

---

DAVID LEARNS HIS LESSON

David Holliday learned about hoaxes the hard way after deleting a file from his computer

'I received a hoax email from a "reliable" friend warning me about a file called sulfnbk.exe. I took the warning seriously and deleted the file, even removing it from the dustbin. I believed the warning because it was from a friend and the terminology used rang true.'

'My suspicions were aroused when I received a subsequent message of apology, saying it was a hoax. I was worried and did some research. I went to the Symantec website (securityresponse.symantec.com/avcenter/hoax.html) because I use Norton AntiVirus and discovered that they list all these hoaxes there.'

'I was pleased to find that the 'hoax virus' I deleted would have little, if any, effect on the running of my computer and decided not

to download a replacement file from the Symantec website.'

'But I don't believe emails any more and always check the Symantec and Microsoft websites first. I did get another email called jdbgmgr.exe a couple of weeks later but this was listed as a hoax so I didn't delete the file.'

The next time David gets an email warning him to delete a file, he'll check before trashing it
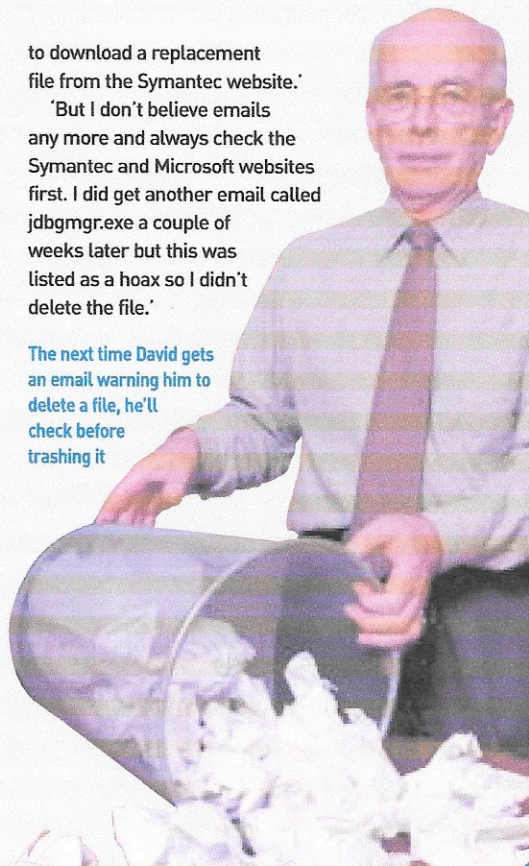
Terrifying tales

Horrifying urban legends, like chain letters (overleaf), are a type of hoax that has blossomed in the electronic age.

One legend that's done the rounds is a scare story entitled 'Travellers BEWARE!!!!!!'. The gist of the story is that there's a crime ring targeting business travellers. A person approaches them at the bar and offers to buy them a drink.

Unbeknown to the traveller the drink is spiked, and the next thing they know they wake up in an ice-cold bath in their hotel room. Taped to the wall is a letter telling them not to move but to call for help straight away. The emergency services, which are familiar with the crime, inform the victim that both of their kidneys have been 'harvested'.

It's a gruesome tale.

Another popular story is the classic late night yarn concerning the 'hairy hitchhiker'. You stop to pick up a woman by the side of the road but something doesn't smell quite right. Suspicions aroused, you ask her to get out of the car and help you reverse. When she gets out, you speed away to safety only to discover an axe concealed beneath the passenger seat.

Both (thankfully) have no factual basis. The United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS)

"x,y,z" attachment,' warns Eric Chien, chief researcher for Symantec.

DEALING WITH HOAXES

In the future, it is possible that anti-virus software will be capable of quarantining hoaxes as well as viruses.

A technique called heuristics monitors hoax emails and looks for common threads between them. 'What's interesting is that the words that the computer picks out are not the types of things that a human being would look for – it singles out flash phrases such as "click on this link",' said Chien. He believes that this technology could appear in anti-virus products later this year.

In the meantime, if you receive a virus warning that you think could be a hoax, the first thing that to do is check a reputable source, such as an anti-virus vendor. Both Sophos and Symantec list known viruses and virus hoaxes – if the virus you have been warned about isn't listed, it almost certainly doesn't exist.

Cost	
Scare	
Nuisance	
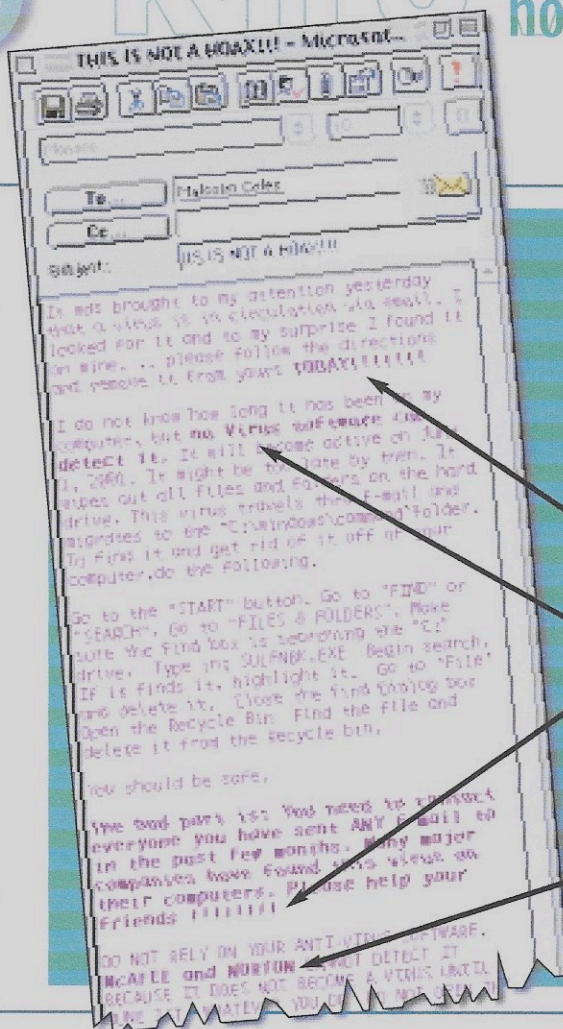
Hoaxes come in all shapes and sizes but they do exhibit common traits, which should alert you when one falls into your in-box. We've used the SULFNBK.EXE, a classic virus hoax, to illustrate some of the things to watch out for.

Too many exclamation marks and capital letters should set alarm bells ringing.

Hoax writers often make this type of wild claim.

Hoaxsters often want you to 'tell all your friends'. Don't fall for it. Passing on hoaxes can cause as much disruption as actual viruses.

Hoaxes often mention real sources to give themselves credibility.

---

dismisses rumours of organ trafficking. 'Such trafficking would be impossible to conduct without detection,' says an official statement from UNOS. A police investigation in New Orleans (where the kidney legend is thought to originate) also found nothing. 'The warnings that are being disseminated through the Internet are FICTITIOUS,' said the New Orleans Police Department.

Nevertheless, the rumours are here to stay. The 'Travellers Beware' email dates back to 1996 while the story of the hairy hitchhiker began in 1980s Britain.

More modern day equivalents include an email entitled 'SlaveMaster Warning,' which warns women not to reply to instant messages or emails from someone called slavemaster, claiming he has killed 56 women.

Urban myths like these cause unnecessary panic. That said, a little research can soon sort fact from fiction. If you receive a gruesome message, check it with the relevant authorities such as your local police force. The Urban Legends site lists known legends.

Cost	
Scare	
Nuisance	

hints&tips

Scare stories spread offline, in the pub or local shop, as well as online – a fact that makes them hard to kill off. Other hoaxes, such as the picture, right, rely solely on email to circulate.

This photograph of a marine being attacked by a shark comes as part of an email entitled 'bad day', which says that if you thought you weren't having much fun at work, you should take a look at this award winning photograph.

Many people have forwarded it. But myth debunking site, www.truthorfiction.com, proves that the picture is a fake by revealing its true origins as two composite pictures.

Charles Maxwell, specialist underwater photographer, took the picture of a shark

breaching (www.underwatervideo.co.za). The helicopter is a HH-60G Pave Hawk, flown by the California Air Force. This picture was taken during a training exercise. Whoever created the hoax reversed the photograph.

Knowhow how to spot a hoax
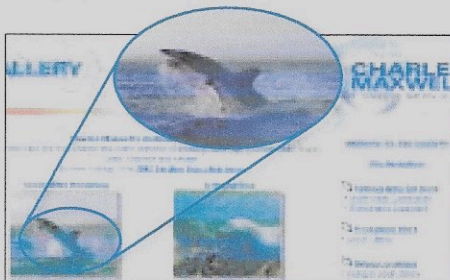
Chain emails

Chain letters aren't a new phenomenon but the advent of the web makes it easier to spread them to millions in a relatively short space of time.

One of the most common types of chain letter promises you money or prizes in exchange for passing it on. One, which pretends to come from Bill Gates, promises a $1,000 reward to those that circulate the email (your mail needs to reach 1,000 people for your to qualify for the prizes).

A variation on the theme falsely promises a free WAP-enabled (wireless application protocol – which gives you mobile net access) phone if you pass on an email about Nokia's new models.
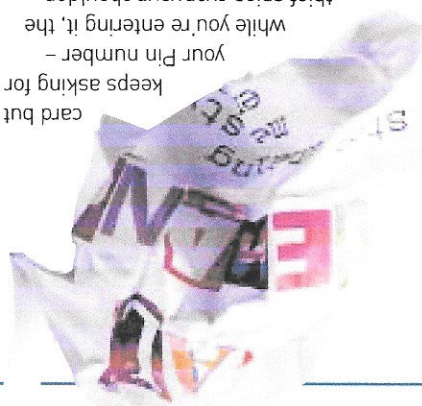
EMAIL ALERT

Chain letters are also used to pass on misinformation about plausible sounding 'crimes' – these tend to be less alarming than the terrifying tales on p24.

An email about the 'Lebanese Loop' describes a fictitious form of cash machine theft. It reports how thieves insert thin plastic wallets into ATMs. As a result, the machine won't recognise your card but keeps asking for your Pin number – while you're entering it, the thief spies over your shoulder. Eventually, you give up, with your card apparently stuck in the machine. The thief then removes the wallet and your card and empties your account.

LETTER BOMB

By passing chain emails on, you bestow them with virus-like qualities – in that they take up system resources.

They have also had serious consequences for the police. The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) is credited as the source of the Lebanese Loop. 'That method (the Lebanese Loop) is not physically possible but these types of crime do exist', admits a spokesperson for ACPO. One genuine scam involves two people standing behind you. While one watches you punch in your Pin, the other pretends you have dropped £20. When you stoop to pick it up they run off with your card.

The danger is that, as a result of the Lebanese Loop (and the public phone-call scam warning), the public won't believe genuine reports.

CHECK THE FACTS

If these hoaxes can fool police trained officers then what hope do we have? The answer is plenty if you know what to look for. One way to tell that you've been sent a chain letter is the phrase 'tell all your friends'. ACPO asks that you check with your local police force about warnings that a crime is taking place. Of course, on past performances, they may be no better informed than you!

Cost

Scare

Nuisance

Fool's gold

Incredibly, advanced fee or '419' frauds con people out of millions of pounds every year.

Here's how they work.

Criminals send a bulk email claiming to have a large sum of cash in a foreign country that they need to transfer to the UK – which is where you come in. In exchange for 'borrowing' your bank account details, the sender will share the proceeds with you.

The scam occurs after you reply. At this point the conmen tell you that they need money in advance to grease the palms of uncooperative officials.

NIGERIAN LETTER

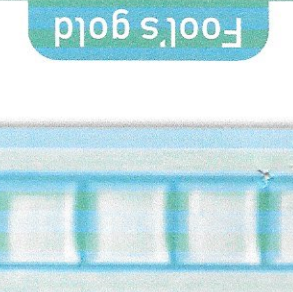The most prolific version is the 'Nigerian Letter' from a Mrs Mariam Abacha, claiming to be the widow of the former Nigerian head of state. 'Poor' Mariam is in exile and her bank accounts are frozen. Luckily, her husband managed to smuggle $20 million in cash out of the country before he died. She needs your bank account to get the money out of the country and will reward you for doing so.

MIXED POSTBAG

These frauds are simple to set up. 'It's easy money,' said a spokesperson for NCIS, which suspects that criminals have even set up schools to teach others the scam.

As a result, there are plenty of variations, including the Ethiopian airline letter, the Nepalese Royal Family, and Colonel Michael Bundu's Letter from the Congo'.

Possibly the biggest warning sign in these frauds is that a stranger on the other side of the world wants to give you millions of pounds. Another clue is the amount (usually in the region of $20 million). Also check the email address – criminals often use internet-based accounts so that they can disguise their real details.
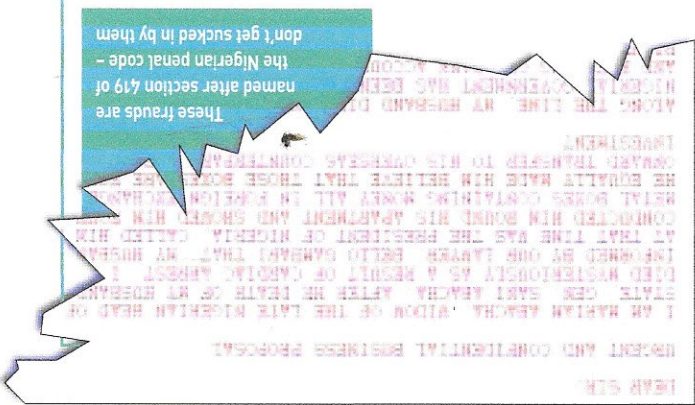
If you receive a letter like this, check law enforcement agencies such as NCIS (www.ncis.gov.uk/wacu) and the FBI (www.fbi.gov/contact/fo/phnx/pxfraud.htm). And never pass them on to friends as a joke – they might just fall for it.

These frauds are named after section 419 of the Nigerian penal code – don't get sucked in by them

URGENT AND CONFIDENTIAL BUSINESS PROPOSAL

DEAR SIR,

I AM MARIAM ABACHA, WIDOW OF THE LATE NIGERIAN HEAD OF STATE, GEN. SANI ABACHA. AFTER THE DEATH OF MY HUSBAND I INFORMED BY OUR LAWYER HELLO DABRABI THAT MY HUSBAND DIED MYSTERIOUSLY AS A RESULT OF CARDIAC ARREST. AT THAT TIME HE WAS THE PRESIDENT OF NIGERIA. CALLED HIM CONFIDED HIM ABOUT HIS APARTMENT AND SHOWN HIM METAL BOXES CONTAINING MONEY ALL IN FOREIGN CURRENCY. HE EQUALLY MADE HIM BELIEVE THAT THOSE BOXES BE ONWARD TRANSFER TO HIS OVERSEAS COUNTERPA... INVESTMENT. ALONG THE TIME, MY HUSBAND DI... NIGERIA GOVERNMENT WAS DEE...

Cost

Scare

Nuisance

Computer love

Looking for love or someone to spend a romantic evening with this Valentine's Day? Look no further than the web as we bring you our essential guide to internet dating

SarahK@which.net

With Valentine's Day approaching you can guarantee the shops are full of padded cards, heart-shaped confectionary and lovesick teddy bears, and that the price of roses will skyrocket as the day nears. But if a hot date for 14 February is less of a certainty, don't despair. Whether you're looking for friendship, a spot of harmless flirting or a future Mr or Mrs, the web is the perfect place to meet someone.

Online dating puts you in control of what can be a daunting process, so you have the final say over whom you approach, which amorous advances you reciprocate and whether things progress past first base. There's no shortage of potential dates, either – the number of visitors to dating sites rose by 17 per cent in the first half of 2003, according to web monitoring service, Hitwise. We look at the best dating websites and show you how it's done.

SITE SEARCH

Before you fall head over heels for the first dating site you clap eyes on it's wise to shop around. Whether a website will suit depends on the type of relationship you want – some sites are more light-hearted than others, for instance. 'We think of ourselves as a flirting site rather than somewhere where you'd meet your future partner,' says Alex Kovach, managing director of Lycos UK. Nonetheless, it has had its share of weddings (see Marriage@Lycos, p24).

Just good friends?

If you'd rather get to know someone before you start dating then there are sites, such as Makefriendsonline (www.makefriendsonline.com), that focus on friendship rather than romance (although you can also browse for potential partners). 'I don't like the idea of a "cattle market" approach where you contact people, date them and then hope for the best. I met my wife through friends and it's a more natural approach,' said Martin Bysh, managing director of Makefriendsonline.

By comparison, subscription-based dating sites tend to be more serious matchmakers. Unlike most freebies, fee-paying websites will match your profile with potential partners on the site and may even screen who registers with them.

Vital Statistics

Most sites offer a free trial but before you sign up it's worth checking out the site's credentials. 'Take a look at the types of questions that you are asked on the profile. Do they reflect what you are interested in?' advises Jennifer Mackay, for Christianconnection.co.uk.

Check out the message boards, chatrooms and profiles and see whether the people on the site live locally, are the right age and if there's anyone who catches your eye.

PERFECT MATCH

Depending on your preferences, you may want to choose one of the numerous niche

dating sites on the web. Many are organised by religion, such as Christianconnection.co.uk and J Date (www.Jdate.com), which matches Jewish singles. Gaydar (www.gaydar.co.uk) is the web's leading gay dating site and there are other exclusive sites, such as VanityDate (www.vanitydate.com), which claims to screen for 'top quality' singles. The UK dating guide (www.ukdatingguide.co.uk) is a useful directory of UK dating sites and includes summaries of their target audiences.

First impressions

Once you've found the perfect website it's time to start hunting for that dream date. It's vital to spend some time working on your online 'profile', which details your likes and dislikes and a brief personality description, if you want to attract the right people. 'Seventy five per cent of communication is based on first impressions. People think that they have to behave in a certain way. If you're a bubbly and outgoing person don't post a profile that's constrained,' said Sarah Whittaker, a personal lifestyle profiler. Also, make sure that your photograph shows you at your best and that it's a true representation of who you are. 'Don't post a picture of yourself in a sun hat when you don't wear one every day,' says Whittaker.

BLIND DATE

So how easy is it to find a date on the web? Computing Which? decided we'd play at matchmaker, (after all if Cilla Black can do it...) and recruited a panel of hopefuls looking to find love online. We're not buying any hats just yet but after only one month the response was really positive with a few dates and a lorra, lorra laughs along the way.

Jane Free signed up to Love@Lycos (love.lycos.co.uk) and has already been out on two dates and has another arranged, while AR went on a date arranged via DatingDirect (www.datingdirect.com) and

> **Love@Lycos – great features and plenty of response** — Jane Free

TOP 10 Dating sites

Top ten dating sites for the end of September 2003, according to Hitwise.com

1. **Udate**
2. **Gaydar**
3. **Love@Lycos UK**
4. **Yahoo! Personals UK and Ireland**
5. **Meetic**
6. **DatingDirect**
7. **Match.com**
8. **Match.com UK**
9. **Datingagency**
10. **MSN.co.uk Love**

PA had one date through Udate (www.udate.com). However, the response via Datingagency (www.datingagency.com) was too big for AF. 'I had 1,323 people view my profile and almost 400 make contact. It was totally overwhelming in terms of trying to work out whom to keep contact with,' she said. She blamed Datingagency's profile for the overwhelming response saying that 'you only had a sentence or two and most questions were about physical appearance'. That said, Datingagency's profile covers the basic attributes most people are likely to want taken into account during the matching process and does give you the opportunity to give more detail about yourself if you wish.

Jane, on the other hand, found the Love@Lycos profile to be very comprehensive. 'You can add anything at all and can update them at any time.'

All of our romantics were impressed with the sites' security. In each case you made contact with potential dates via the websites rather than handing over personal email addresses. 'There's no

> **Psychologists say you can tell in under four minutes if you fancy someone. I guess speed dating cuts to the chase in that respect.** — Suzanne Valentine

need to give your real name or email address. You do leave a "trail" as you view people so it means that there is no private checking out,' said AF. 'You are as anonymous as you want to be,' said PA, regarding the Udate service.

There were mixed reactions to the profile matching and contacts made via the sites. Jane said of her dates that 'both men matched their profiles and we really hit it off well. They let me choose the location and were very gentlemanly and wouldn't let me pay.' PA also said there was a 'good range of users', but AF complained that 'some members could be very pushy if you didn't respond to their emails'.

SPEED DATE

However, if you prefer to meet people face-to-face rather than over the web you can always book an evening out at a 'speed date'. Speed dates are organised events, usually held in bars or restaurants; you get three minutes to chat to each person on the night and if you hit it off with anyone, you can arrange to chat further afterwards.

Suzanne Valentine (yes, her real name) arranged her speed date through Speeddater (www.speeddater.co.uk). The

Internet speed dating in action

site lists speed dates across the country and whether there are still male and female places available. As well as general speed dates there are niche events that target Jewish participants or sports and fitness enthusiasts, say. 'The site covers most of the major, metropolitan areas and it's very clear which venues, dates and groups the evenings cater to,' said Suzanne.

Suzanne paid £25 for the event, held in a basement club, and out of the 20 'dates' claims to have hit it off with five. 'It was fun trying to keep up conversations with 20 hopefuls but the time limit minimised the pregnant pauses,' said Suzanne. Though she did suffer from date fatigue and complained that 'the candlelight was

a little too dark, literally putting the '"blind" in blind date.' Bridget, who also arranged a speed date through Speeddater, said that the experience was 'less time consuming and more immediate than online dating. I think you can tell if there's potential more quickly.' But she was less impressed that 'one man groped my knees under the table.'

Broadening horizons

In future, the advantages of speed and online dating could be combined. Speeddater and Telewest Broadband recently hosted the UK's first broadband speed date. The Camden event saw nine women take part in a speed date with a difference. Rather than mingling with single men in person, the participants spent the statutory four minutes per date talking to their 'partner' over a broadband internet connection. They were all equipped with a laptop installed with Netmeeting and a headphone and microphone set, while the men took part from the comfort of their own home.

The men were from various parts of the country including Somerset, Birmingham and Southend. As with a normal speed date, all were given score cards to rate the people they spoke to; by entering the scores on the Speeddater website the following day you can see whether you 'clicked' with another participant.

The event was only a demonstration, but it is only a matter of time before you're able to log on to a speed date from the comfort of your living room.

MARRIAGE@LYCOS

Mark Dutton met his wife, Jen, through Love@Lycos. They have a two-year-old son, Owen.

'A mate got me interested in an online chatroom. At the time I was working long shifts at work and, when it was quiet, we'd log on and chat to people. Jen and I started bantering in a private chatroom. I'm from Newcastle and she said that she "had a bit of a thing for the Geordie boys".

'We spoke online for a few days and eventually exchanged mobile numbers. Jen rang first when she'd been for a few drinks with her mates. Then we started to speak every night and it got to the stage that we were leaving work early to talk to each other. I knew I loved her before we'd even met.

'After three weeks talking on the phone we decided to meet up. We'd already exchanged photos so she knew I didn't look like Jabba the Hut. We met at Newcastle train station as it's wise to meet in a public place. We were married two years later and now have a beautiful boy, Owen.'

Dating agencies

| Website and address	Cost	Free trial	Claimed members	Target age range	Photo	Personal profile
Udate[1] www.udate.com	Free profile posting. £8.50 per month for six-month subscription.	✓	700,000	25-44+	✓	✓
Gaydar www.gaydar.co.uk	Free guest membership or £8 per month, £17 for three months, £60 per year for full membership.	✓	1.2 million	18-45	✓	✓
Love@Lycos love.lycos.co.uk	Free flirting site or £14 per year for Lycos Deluxe.	✓	650,000	18-34+	✓	✓
Yahoo! Personals UK & Ireland www.yahoo.co.uk/personals	Free profile posting. Annual subscriptions from under £6 per month.	✓	Not given	18-50	✓	✓
Meetic www.meetic.co.uk	Free profile posting. Subscriptions from 24 euros a month.	✓	150,000	25-45	✓	✓
DatingDirect www.datingdirect.com	Free guest membership. Subscriptions from £19.95 per month.	✓	975,000	25-45+	✓	✓
Match.com www.match.com	Free profile posting. Subscriptions cost £16 per month, £30 per three months, £60 per year.	✗[2]	378,000	25-45	✓[3]	✓
Match.com UK http://uk.match.com	See details for Match.com above.					
Datingagency www.datingagency.com	Subscription costs £60 per year.	✓	Not given	Not given	✓	✓
MSN Love www.msn.co.uk/love	See details for Match.com above.					

Dating agent

It's simple to register with a dating agent. We show you how using Match.com.

① UK dating Go to www. match.com. Click on Match International, choose United Kingdom and check the box to make this your default site. Registering with Match.com allows you to create a profile, search the site's database and add a photograph. However, you can't contact or reply to anyone via the website unless you subscribe (see the table for details). Click the 'Free Registration' link on the left-hand side of the Home Page.

② Register your interest First enter a user name and your search criteria, for example, a man seeking a woman. Next enter your date of birth and country of residence (England, Scotland, Wales) and hit continue. Next pick the city closest to you and hit 'join'.
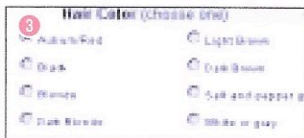
③ Sell yourself If you want to get a date via the website, you need to create an online profile. Click 'My Profile' and check the physical description boxes – build, hair and eye colour etc. Next you can choose to complete an 'Expanded Profile', which asks questions about your personality, where your ideal place to live is and how you'd describe your sense of humour. Enter a description of yourself and your ideal partner – if you can't think of anything to write, the site offers some handy tips.
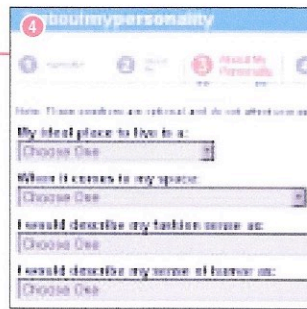
④ Model behaviour The most successful profiles are the ones that have a photograph attached, and adding one to the Match website is easy. Click 'post my photo'. You can now browse for a photograph on your computer and, once you've found one you like, click 'Upload'. Match.com vets all pictures on the site so you will have to wait between 24 and 72 hours before your picture goes 'live'. Alternatively you can email your photo to Match and they'll post it for you.

⑤ Finding a date When you're ready to start looking for a suitable date. Visit your personalised home page and select from the potential dates that match your profile. Alternatively, click on Search, enter your criteria and hit 'Go'. If you find someone that takes your fancy you'll need to subscribe before you can contact them.

safety tips

- Make sure you tell a friend where you're going, with whom and when.
- **Take a mobile phone with you and make sure its battery is fully charged**
- Meet in a public place
- **Don't drink too much**
- Ask a friend to call you half way through the evening to check you're OK and provide an escape route, if needed
- **Don't accept a lift home**
- Never swap contact details until you're 100 per cent sure that the person is genuine
- **Offer suitors a landline rather than a mobile number**
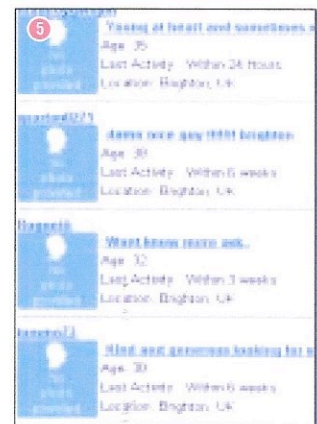
Instant messaging or chat	Profile matcher
✓	✓
✗	✗
✓	✓
✓	✓
✓	✓
✗	✗
✓	✓
✗	✗

Table notes

1 Udate is now owned by Match.com, which is in the process of merging the companies' services.
2 Free seven-day trials are offered periodically.
3 Plus video

www.udate.com

www.gaydar.co.uk

www.yahoo.co.uk/personals

www.meetic.co.uk

www.datingdirect.com

www.datingagency.com