

Using MSN Messenger

Use online chat when you can't wait for email. *by Russell Shaw*

We humans are a communicative species, and we have several alternatives for talking with one another.

Face-to-face dialog is the most effective form of communication, but if that's not an option, we usually settle for a phone call (which isn't always cheap) or email (which isn't always instantaneous). Technology offers a better solution, and it's called instant messaging.

Instant messaging is written communication that occurs in real time over the Internet. Since it happens in real time, it's much closer to face-to-face or telephone conversation than email.

Unlike telephone or email service, however, you and the person you're corresponding with must be using the same IM software. This is a silly

limitation brought about by rivalry between the various IM service providers (AOL, ICQ, Microsoft, and Yahoo). Imagine if you couldn't telephone your friend in another state because AT&T was providing your phone service, but he relied on MCI. In any event, we'll focus on Microsoft's MSN Messenger for the purposes of this article.

INSTALL MSN MESSENGER

In order to use MSN Messenger, you'll need a Microsoft .NET Passport. If your Internet service is provided by Microsoft's MSN, or if you're using Microsoft's Hotmail service, you already have this; otherwise, here's how to get one:

Open your Web browser (e.g., Internet Explorer) and type www.passport.net in the address window. Click on the large button that reads "Register for your free .NET Passport today."

When the registration page opens, type your email address and choose a password. MSN will send an email to this address, and you'll need to respond to it before you can use MSN Messenger (this is designed to ensure that you provided a valid address). You'll be ready to download

the MSN Messenger program as soon as you reply.

Next, point your browser to messenger.msn.com and click the Download Now button. When the download is complete, click on the Open button in the dialog box to begin the installation process. Once MSN Messenger is installed, click on the sign-in button, type your sign-name and password, and click on OK. Now you're ready to begin using MSN Messenger!

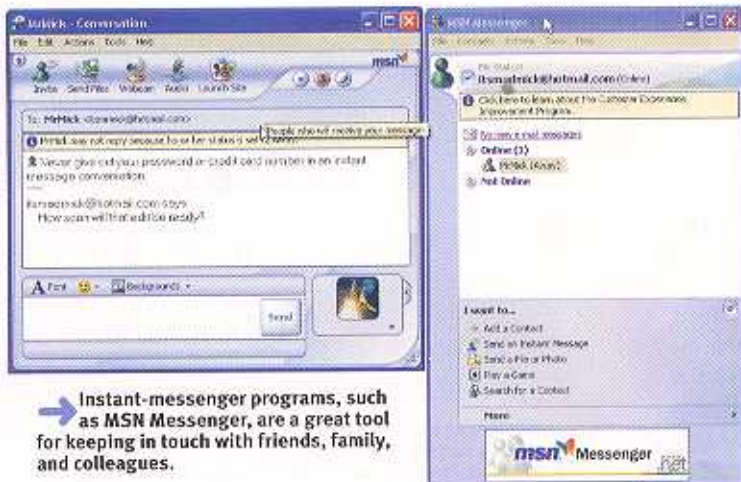
SET UP YOUR CONTACTS

To get the best use from MSN Messenger, create a list of the people you'll be corresponding with on a regular basis—and who are also running MSN Messenger.

Next, set up a list of frequent contacts. Before adding someone to your contact list, check with them to make sure they already have a Hotmail or MSN Passport email address. This doesn't need to be their *main* email address, but MSN Messenger will not work with other email addresses.

Next, click the Contacts menu in the main MSN Messenger window and then choose Add A Contact. In the Add A Contact box, click on the menu item that reads "Create a New Contact by entering their email address or sign-in name." Type in their e-mail address and click Next.

If that person already has a .NET Passport email address, you'll see a Success! box noting that your entry



Instant-messenger programs, such as MSN Messenger, are a great tool for keeping in touch with friends, family, and colleagues.

has been added. If you'd like to send your correspondent an email informing them they've been added to your list, click the Send An Email prompt.

After you've installed MSN Messenger, you'll find sending and receiving instant messages to be simple and easy. When you sign in, MSN Messenger will display a list of contacts, divided into two categories: those who are online and those who are offline. You can send IMs only to those contacts who are online.

To send a message, either double-click on the contact's name, or click on Send An Instant Message and choose the contact's name from the list that appears. Enter your note in the small box at the bottom of the Conversation window, and click Send. Then, just wait a few seconds for your recipient to respond. If they're sitting at their computer, their reply message will appear in the Conversation window, right below your message.

PROTECTING YOUR PRIVACY

Instant messaging is the most direct and immediate form of online communication. Unfortunately, spammers have figured out that instant messaging is an effective way to reach people in real time. You almost certainly don't want spammers hawking their get-rich-schemes and baldness cures while you are IM'ing with friends. You may not even want your work colleagues to contact you off hours.

Fortunately, MSN Messenger offers convenient ways to block unwanted messages. To block a specific person who is *not* on your contacts list, you need to know the e-mail address associated with that person's .NET Passport. In the main MSN Messenger window, click the Actions menu, and then click Send an Instant Message. Click the Other tab. Type the e-mail address of the person you want to block, and then click OK. When the Conversation window pops up, click the Block button near the top of the window. The contact you're blocking will get the impression you're offline, and they won't be able to send you any instant messages.

To block messages from spammers, click the Tools menu, and then click Options. Click the Privacy tab. Under the heading "My Allow List," click All Others, and then click Block. This will prevent anyone who isn't on your contact list from reaching you with an instant message.

To adjust your Allow List for an individual IM session, follow the same process as above, but click the names of those people on your Contact list you do not wish to communicate with. Then, click Block. Should you wish to unblock these people, highlight their name and then click Allow. Because you may not remember that you've disabled this access for some people on your Contacts list, it's a good idea to re-enable their access before you log off. ■

ALTERNATIVE IM PROGRAMS

As we've noted, MSN Messenger is but one of four popular IM programs. All the major IM programs operate in a similar fashion: Once you've set up your IM software with your e-mail address, password, and user name, you sign in, identify the people with whom you wish to exchange messages, write your note, click Send, and wait on their reply.

To download a copy of AOL Instant Messenger, point your browser to www.aim.com; for Yahoo Messenger, point your browser to messenger.yahoo.com; and for ICQ, go to www.icq.com.

If you decide to install multiple instant-messenger programs, you'll want to look into a clever program called Trillian to help you manage them (refer to the sidebar "Managing Multiple IM Programs" for details).



➔ AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) is another very popular instant-messaging program.

MANAGING MULTIPLE IM PROGRAMS

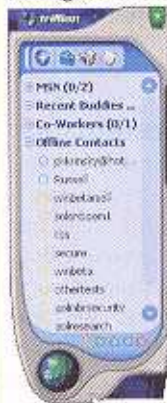
Although you can't use MSN Messenger to send an instant message to someone who's using AOL Instant Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, or ICQ (or vice versa), Cerulean Studios has created a handy program that enables you to carry on IM conversations through multiple services using a single user interface. The program is called Trillian, and the basic version is available for free. (Trillian Pro comes with more features and costs \$25.)

You can download the program from Cerulean's Website at www.ceruleanstudios.com. When you install the program, you'll be asked to provide your email address and contact information for each IM program that Trillian supports.

Once the program is set up, it will display a list of your contacts from each of your IM programs. You can add new contacts by clicking on the Add Contacts icon and then entering the relevant information in the Buddy Wizard.

A single click on one of the buttons at the bottom of the Trillian window will initiate an IM session using that service. To start an IM session from within Trillian, click on one of the buttons at the bottom of the Trillian window (there's one button for each IM service. Hold the mouse cursor over each one and a window will pop up to identify its affiliation.)

If you wish to send an IM using your AIM account, for example, click on the yellow button and choose Connection Manager from the pop-up window. You can subsequently sign onto to your other IM-service accounts and use the same window to conduct multiple conversations with your contacts no matter which IM service they're using.



➔ Cerulean Software's Trillian program enables you to use a single user interface with multiple instant-messaging services.