

# ACCESS THE INTERNET WITH HANDHELD DEVICES

According to the eTForecasts report entitled, 55 Percent of U.S. to Use Devices for Net Access by 2005, 115.4 million U.S. users will connect to the Internet using a wireless device -- such as a cell phone or PDA -- by the year 2005. Worldwide, that number is expected to grow to 596 million.

## **Why go wireless?**

As cell phone and PDA technology advances, it becomes easier and easier to check your e-mail on a portable device. And the purveyors of news are tapping into this trend by creating Web sites that are customized for handheld devices. These include everything from portals that deliver stock quotes, news headlines, and other frequently updated information, to comparison-shopping sites.

However, while it's possible to surf the net on a cell phone, the small screen and limited power of these devices means they will not bring you the fun, graphic-filled Web you're used to.

Far more useful is the e-mail functionality, which allows you to send and receive mail, and download attachments (or in some cases, file names only). This means you don't need to lug around a laptop and go through the often painful procedure of booting up and connecting to the Internet when you are away from your desk and need to check your e-mail.

Even this use, however, is limited. Do not expect to compose long, thoughtful e-mails using a telephone touch pad or a Palm stylus. Expect to send out short answers to messages and to learn which messages are waiting for you whenever you get your hands on a keyboard.

### **Choosing a device and service plan**

If you decide that you do indeed need to check your e-mail from a variety of locations and do not want to depend on a laptop, then the next step is to decide on the type of device you would like to use.

There are three essential options for using a small, handheld device to access the Internet: an Internet-capable phone; a PDA; or a PDA that includes phone functionality.

If your primary mobile communication need involves talking and you crave tiny devices, a phone could be the right solution for you. Many consumer cell phone plans offer Internet access for a nominal monthly fee. This will allow you to surf the Web (in a very limited fashion, though cell phone screens are improving) and check and send e-mail. Keep in mind that using a cell phone keypad to enter an e-mail longer than just a few words is a challenge.

If your mobile communication needs are more extensive -- you'd like to write e-mails and receive attachments -- a personal digital assistant (PDA) is probably your best bet. PDAs offer better viewing, as their screens are simply larger. Handspring offers expandable PDAs. You also can purchase a communications module that allows you to add a modem to your PDA or even turn it into a telephone. Palm also offers options that

allow for Internet access. The Tungsten W, Tungsten C, and i705 all provide wireless connectivity options.

However, it is increasingly possible, and attractive, to combine both of these devices -- a phone and PDA -- into a single unit. The Handspring modules make it possible to turn your older device into a phone. Handspring also offers the Treo communicators that come with phone and PDA functionality. Many typical phone plans work with these devices. As with regular cell phones, you will have to pay an additional fee for Internet access.

Once you have the hardware -- a PDA and modem -- you have to choose an ISP. Be sure to ask yourself questions about your anticipated usage. You should know how much time you plan to spend online and whether you will travel around the world, the country, or just within your home city. Be sure your plan covers your basic needs without additional charges. Also, be aware of the point at which additional charges may kick in and how much they are.

Once you decide on your needs, look at the available plans and then choose the one that works for you. Always talk to a provider service representative before actually signing up. Also, make sure everything will work with your hardware. CNET's Wireless Buyer's Guide will help you to sort through all your options.

### **The bottom line**

Figure out your needs before you look at phones, PDAs, calling plans, or wireless Internet access providers so you will be able to choose knowledgeably. It is too easy to

be convinced that you need something just because it's available. If you think of your needs first, you'll be less likely to spend money on features or air time that you will never use.

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