

# ST: DON'T TELL SID!

One of the most exciting developments in the world of home and business computing has to be communications. The ability to link your micro into a huge mainframe, or send and receive messages worldwide in a fraction of the time taken by conventional mail services, or simply to chat and make new friends and valuable contacts not only nationwide but worldwide, via your micro, a modem, and the telephone line.

Communications (or comms) already has many fans across the globe, and the technology has been made simple and relatively cheap. Anyone who wishes to put their ST online can do so with a minimum of fuss and bother, provided that they have a little knowledge on which to base their choice of equipment and software, and of course the services to which they wish to gain access. I hope to introduce you to some of the possibilities of communicating with your ST in this article.

The first question asked is why bother with comms in the first place? What's actually out there? There's no simple answer to the first part of the question, as it depends on the needs of the individual or company concerned; the business user will of course be looking for ways to increase efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

A prime example of this would be where a small company would find a Telex facility useful, but could not justify the costs of a full Telex system, therefore they might wish to make use of the office micro and subscribe to one of the Electronic mail (Email) services such as Telecom Gold, One to One, or Microlink, which have Telex facilities.

Larger companies might find it convenient to enable their branches or sales representatives to send orders via the telephone to their main computer system; many companies already do this and find it very useful indeed, especially as this can be done outside office hours!

Time is money, and the ability to send messages worldwide within 24 hours or less can be a boon to many businesses. It is not always necessary for the recipient of Email to be a subscriber to a system, as many services operate a facility whereby your message may be converted into conventional mail and either delivered by courier service or posted in the country of your choice!

So, as you can see, there are many advantages to the business user. What, then, is there to interest the home user?

This depends on the individual, whether hobbyist or those with a particular application for which they purchased their system, such as wordprocessing or home accounting. The advantages of Email feature less in the home market, as there is not only less need, but the cost may seem prohibitive on a home budget!

If you work at home, maybe as a freelance journalist or writer, or are housebound for some reason, you might find the conventional Email services useful, perhaps to send articles to a publisher; most home users tend to turn to two very different but useful alternatives, both of which can have considerable 'entertainment' value as well as practical uses: Prestel/Micronet, and 'Bulletin Boards'.

Prestel, the world's largest commercial Viewdata system, and in particular the Micronet area, has a large following. Its messaging facilities, although crude by professional Email standards, enable users to chat, send brief Telexes worldwide, and to interact with the Information Providers (IP's) who provide the bulk of the system's contents: information. Prestel is very different to most Email systems, as it uses pages of text and block graphics, instead of simple scrolling text. The system also has the great advantage of being acces-

sible at local call rate from most areas in the UK. There is much to be seen on Prestel, but computer hobbyists and professionals tend to be subscribers also to Micronet, an area which can be considered to be the electronic equivalent of a computer magazine, with the significant difference that many parts of the 'Net' can be contributed to in some fashion by its users; there is even an area called the 'Gallery', where for a small quarterly fee, you can edit up to 26 frames on the system, providing information, news, etc, in fact anything you can think of (within reason!).

The essence of Micronet is communication, and regular chat sessions between users are commonplace; live interviews with major figures in the computer industry are a regular feature, giving 'Netters' the opportunity to praise, or put embarrassing questions to, well-known figures. Micronet has areas of general interest, as well as features specific to particular machines; of particular interest to ST owners will be '16/32', a Micronet Contributors area (written by users, for users) opened recently in response to popular demand. In addition, a daily news area caters for those who like to see what's going on in the world of microcomputers before it reaches the conventional magazines!

The Micronet main menu from *Fastcom*; the software provides a neatly-done emulation of Prestel's teletext graphics set

Desk File Edit Commands Things Style faSTcom

Conn: 1: PRESTEL 021 618 1111 Connected: 00:03

MICRONET (e) 800a Op

OME

Keying #0s from any page will always take you to your front page.

1 News and Comment  
2 Microbases  
3 Communications  
4 Software  
5 Prestel Main Index  
6 Games and Entertainment  
7 Teleshopping/Advertising  
8 Business & Consumer Info.

What's New Today: Key 0  
FULL A-Z INDEX: Key 01

Win two tickets to New York!.....

Help? Key 0 from any page

1	2	3
4	5	6
7	8	9
*	0	#

Prev	Next
Main	Print
Show	Hide
Print	Invert
Load	Save
Note	Recall
Help	Send
Dial	Quit

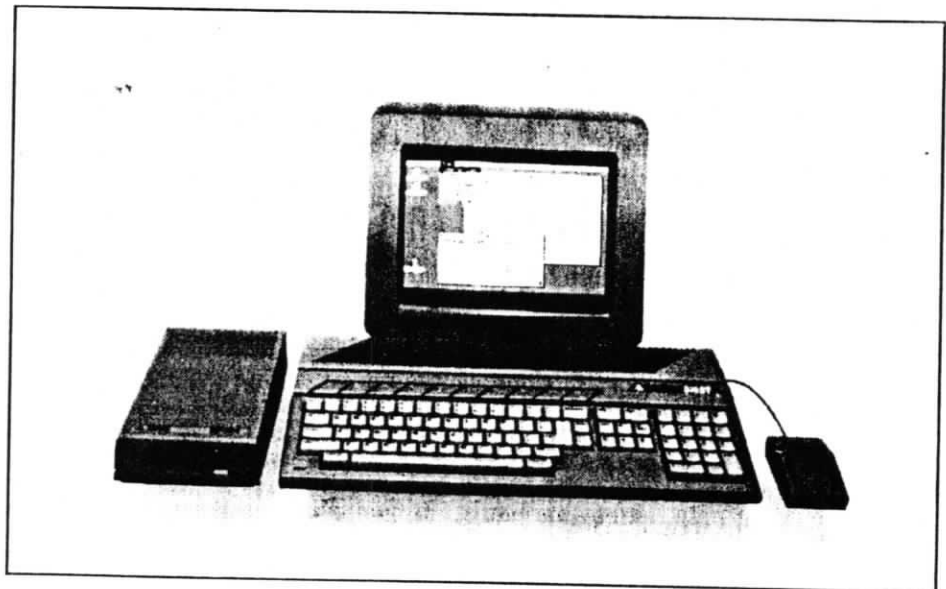
# COMMUNICATIONS

Bulletin Boards work in similar fashion to Email systems; their main use is for messaging between enthusiasts and the distribution of Public Domain Software (which is normally free). Essentially small systems run by hobbyists, bulletin boards are the electronic equivalent of the noticeboard where you can pin up a message for someone to read later. They are normally single user systems (ie only one person may be online to them at any one time) and it can take some time for a conversation (often highly technical) to be completed. Some systems even allow adventure games to be played while online. These friendly systems are located all over the country, but are especially popular in London, which has a wide local call area. Suffice to say, they can be expensive to use, in terms of your phone bill, unless you have one local to you, but can be very rewarding. Most of them do not have a subscription charge (unlike commercial systems); those that do, like the 'Gnome at Home' or 'CIX', tend to be either multi-user systems (expensive to run!) and/or provide special services to subscribers, such as personal editing facilities or software discounts.

So, once you have decided which service interests you, you need to decide on software and hardware. Fortunately, the Atari ST computers have a standard RS232 connector, which simplifies connections considerably. It should be possible to go along to one of the bigger Atari dealers and purchase a complete system of cable, modem (the device which translates the electrical signals from the ST so they can be sent down the 'phone line), and software, 'off the shelf'; but it would be a good idea to consider your needs first.

The popular software packages, such as *Fastcom*, *ST Datacom*, and *Kcomm 2*, are good all-rounders which can be used with any service, whether text only (Email and most bulletin boards) or Viewdata (Prestel mainly); some packages are only suitable for use with text services, such as *Flash* and *PCIntercomm*.

A point to watch for is whether the software is able to use the modem you have in mind; most packages of American origin do not have the facility to use the data transfer speed (Baud rate) which is popular in the UK (mainly due to availability of cheap modems designed for use with Prestel) of 1200/75 baud. You may wish to purchase a modem which will dial the call for you automatically, and most software will allow this with a suitable modem; a 'Hayes-compatible' modem is best if you require this. With regard to costs, average price for software is £50, a simple modem with manual dial and one speed (probably 1200/75 baud) around £30-£50, and a full featured autodial modem, with several speeds, from



£150-£300. It is of course possible to spend a lot more, particularly on modems with high speed ratings, but use of these is limited by the quality of UK 'phone lines!

Having introduced you to comms as it is at present, what of the future? Multi-user Bulletin Boards (where more than one person can be online at once and chat to each other) seem to be on the increase, although these will almost certainly be subscriber systems due to cost of equipment and running. High resolution graphics instead of the current text only or block graphics systems (ie Prestel) are a strong possibility, although the quality of the 'phone system will have to be improved, as much higher transmission speeds will be needed to make this type of system

viable, due to the amount of data involved. The trend towards cheaper, high speed modems is already appearing in the USA; hopefully this will soon spread to this country.

This is particularly relevant since Prestel is introducing high-speed access to its system, enabling use of any modem speed from 300 baud to 2400 baud in addition to the current 1200/75 baud service. Hopefully, I've given you enough information to decide whether it's worthwhile putting your ST online; it may be possible to go into more detail on specific aspects of communications in future articles.

Whether hobbyist or business user, I think you'll agree there's a whole world out there waiting for you to communicate with it!

**Clubspot on Prestel: special interest groups have their own sections, plus general interest areas for science fiction, chess etc.**

```

Desk File Edit Commands Things Style faSTcom
Comm: 1: PRESTEL 021 618 1111 Connected: 00:02
ClubSpot 810. 8100a Op
MAIN INDEX
[Large stylized logo for ClubSpot 810]

11 Adventure Help      24 MSX Corner
12 Bulletin Boards    25 MultiUser Arena
13 Clone Zone         26 New Readers
14 Communications     31 News & Views
15 Clubs/User Grps   32 ANET-2
16 Education          33 RSGB
21 Latest Updates     34 Reviews
22 Messages to Us    35 Specs
23 Micronet 800      36 Talkabout
                       37 Telesoftware

4 HobbySpot - Art, Astronomy, Chess,
  Music, SF, Photography and lots more!

Prestel Microcomputing
New Telesoftware Area
  
```

1	2	3
4	5	6
7	8	9
*	0	#

Prev	Next
Main	Paint
Show	Hide
Print	Invert
Load	Save
Note	Recall
Help	Send
Dial	Quit