

FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Office of Consumer and Business Education

Using Internet Access Products

Remember the days when a personal computer was the only product that would let you surf the Internet and send and receive email? They're history!

Now, consumers have choices: television set-top receivers, handheld computers or "personal digital assistants," dedicated email terminals, game consoles, and even some wireless phones are providing access to many features of the Internet. In many cases, these products are easier to use and less expensive to purchase than a PC, and some provide other benefits.

But the fact is that these products aren't PC's — and they don't provide **all** the same features as a PC. Before you buy a product that claims to provide Internet access, find out what the product can do — and what it can't.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the federal agency responsible for protecting consumers from deceptive and unsubstantiated advertising, suggests that you think about how you plan to use an Internet access product. Do you want to see and hear music videos or late-breaking news? Play games alone or with other people? Participate in chat rooms? Receive email with photos attached? Connect with your friends through instant messaging? The manufacturer or retailer is your best source of information on whether the product you're considering provides the features you want.

If you're shopping for a product that will give you Internet access, consider the following:

- You probably can't do the same things online with an Internet access product that you can with a personal computer. In most cases, a computer lets you access more information and entertainment than an Internet access product. It's important to compare the capabilities of Internet access products to each other and to personal computers.
- The limitations of Internet access products may vary depending on the product and, possibly, the service it uses to connect to the Internet. For example, a small display screen on a cellular phone won't give you the same view of a website as a computer monitor. Internet access products may not let you play certain games, use some audio or video features, send or receive certain attachments to email messages, or view information in formats like Java or PDF (Portable Document Format). You may be able to access information in a text format only. In addition, you may not be able to download information or software from the Internet to add features to your new product the same way you can with a PC. You may have to wait for product upgrades from the manufacturer or Internet service provider.
- To get online, you will have to subscribe to a service that provides Internet access for the product you purchase. The Internet access service may be bundled with the Internet access product you buy. You'll probably have to pay a monthly subscription fee to connect to the Internet. Some people — especially in rural areas — may not be able to access the Internet with a local telephone call. They may have to pay long distance phone charges, or hourly surcharges to their Internet service provider while they're online. Ask about access charges before you buy.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP, or use the complaint form at www.ftc.gov. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION	FOR THE CONSUMER
1-877-FTC-HELP	www.ftc.gov

September 2000