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E-mail is one of the most popular features of the Internet

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This is the seventh of seven columns by Steve Kellman, our newsroom computer wonk, on what to do with that new computer the Big Elf dragged down your chimney. It assumes that the reader is a first-time computer owner who has a PC loaded with Windows 95, word processing and other basic software, a printer, modem and CD-ROM player.*

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Maybe it's latent hostility toward the U.S. Postal Service and its periodic delays. Or maybe it's the lure of instant communication without the cost of a long-distance phone call.

Whatever the reason, e-mail is one of the most popular features on the Internet.

While early e-mail consisted of nothing more than lines of text, the modern-day e-mail message can include links to Web pages allowing the recipient to click and go. You can also attach files to an e-mail message - everything from that year-end report illustrated with color graphics for your boss to a digitized version of your daughter singing Christmas carols for Aunt Mabel.

First you need an Internet service provider like America Online or a local company. You already have one if you've been surfing the World Wide Web. The company will let you choose a "username" or assign one to you, and explain what your e-mail address will be, typically "username@company.com".

Next you need e-mail software, either the mail features included in your Web browser or a freestanding program like Microsoft Exchange.

Don't have a freestanding program and don't want to shell out any money to get your own? Get on the Web and jump to <http://www.eudora.com>, where you can download a starter version of the company's Eudora Pro program called Eudora Light (the hope, of course, is that you'll upgrade to the full-featured version later).

If you opt for the Netscape Navigator Version 3.0 browser, mail features are located under the Window menu as the Netscape Mail menu item. Set up your account using information provided by your service provider by going to Mail and News Preferences... under the Options menu and clicking on Servers. This is where you enter the host name of your server, typically "company.com" in the above example, where it asks for SMTP and POP3 servers (other e-mail programs may call this the "domain name"). The cryptically-named POP3 username is typically the same thing as your original username.

Click on Identity in the same dialog box to enter your real name, full e-mail address ("username@company.com"), and an optional "Signature File," a file you can attach or "append" to your e-mail listing personal information or anything else.

If your e-mail program asks for anything more complex, like a gateway address, you'll need to call your service provider.

Once up and running, use the "attach" or "append" option in your e-mail message window to attach other files to the message, whether documents, graphics or that sound file of your daughter singing Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

Assuming the recipient has the same program you used to create the file, or something similar with the necessary translation features, he or she should be able to download the attached file, usually by right-clicking on it and specifying how and where it should be saved.

Just try doing that with a 32-cent stamp and an envelope.
