



On the other hand, in the little Oregon town where I live, there are no strangers. People stop on the street and say hello, swap some gossip and perhaps offer advice.

America Online is more like my little Oregon community. I spent years on other services and never felt like I belonged. I never got mail, I never contributed to a message board, and I never knew where to find help. It was like a big city to me and I was always anxious to leave. At AOL I'm walking the street in a small town on a sunny day and everyone is smiling. The first day I arrived at AOL, I got a letter from Steve Case. People like Kathy4648 go out of their way to offer assistance. This is my kind of place. I'm at home here.

## Guides

Guides are members chosen by AOL to serve as real-time assistants. Guides are like Members Helping Members, except there's no waiting. Have a question? Ask a Guide.

I recall an art gallery in Amsterdam. There were a number of Rembrandts there, hanging on the wall just like any other picture. No glass cases or protective Lexan—just those radiant Rembrandts, emancipated and free. A gentleman in uniform stood near. He wasn't a guard; the uniform wasn't that severe. He was a guide. He was a volunteer. He got to spend his days in a room full of the Rembrandts he loved and at the same time share his interest with other people. He explained the Rembrandts to us in a fatherly way, exhibiting a proprietorial regard for his fellow countryman's legacy.

Which is precisely what AOL's Guides are. They're members just like the rest of us—experienced members, with particularly helpful online personalities—but members all the same. They remain politely in the background, leaving us to our own explorations, silent unless spoken to. If we need help, however, Guides are always nearby, ready with friendly advice and information. If you have a question—any question at all—about AOL, its services or its policies, ask a Guide.

Like the guide in Amsterdam, you can identify Guides by their appearance: their screen names have the word "Guide" in them. If Figure 3-9's Kathy4648 was to be a Guide (she should be), she would probably be "Guide Kathy," or something like that.



Figure 3-11: A stop by the Lobby for some help from Guide MO.

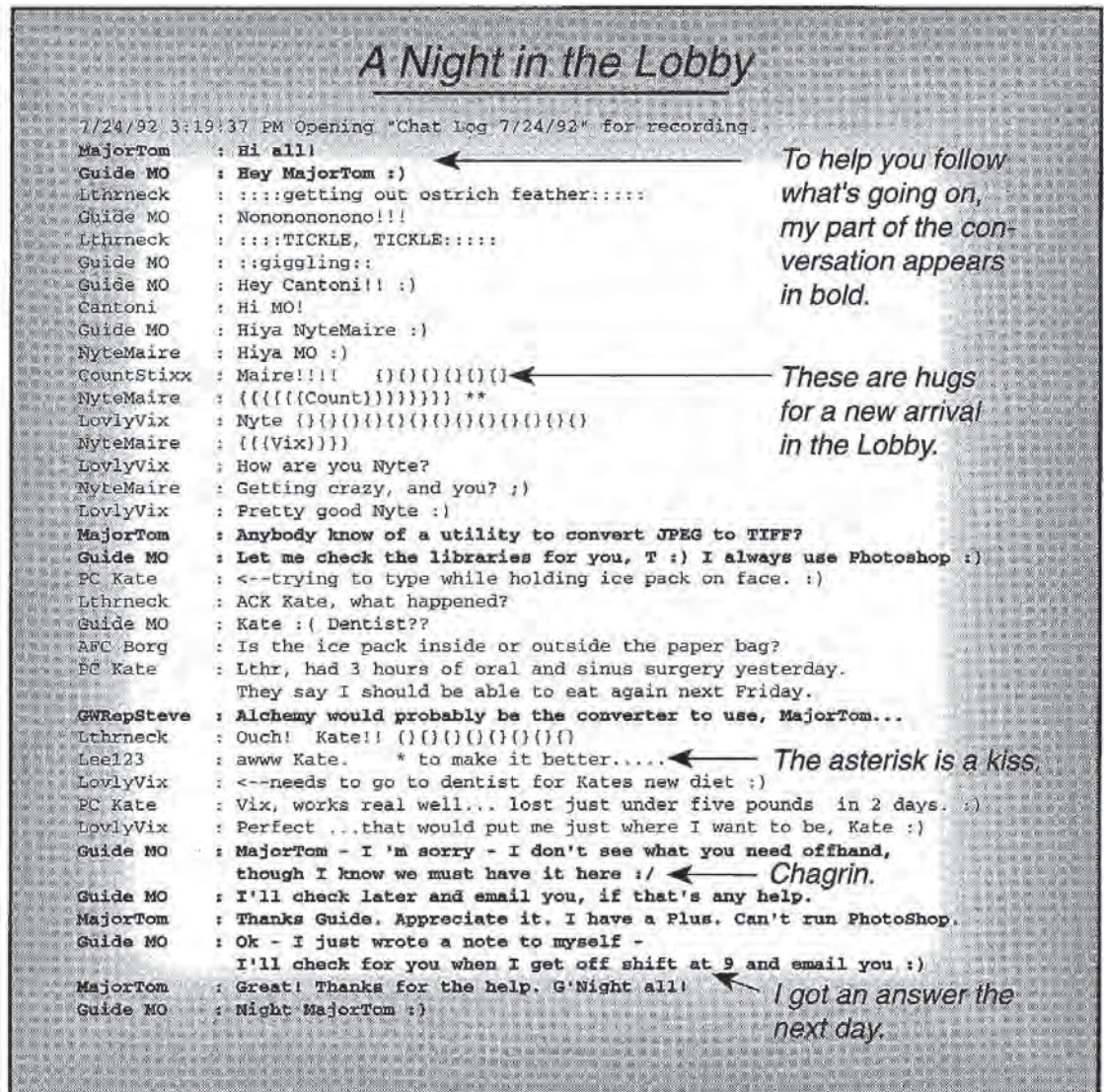


Figure 3-11 is a little hard to follow if you're not used to AOL's so-called "chat rooms." Though chat rooms are discussed in Chapter 12 ("People Connection"), a little explanation seems in order here as well. Twenty-one people were in the room when I visited. Many were just watching (lurkers), but others seemed to be old friends. The room was full of "smileys" (turn your head counterclockwise 90 degrees and :) becomes a smile) and hugs. Smileys are discussed in Chapter 13, "Clubs & Interests," and Chapter 20, "Ten Best." The entire illustration is a "chat log" (see your File menu for the Logging command).

Chat rooms can be intimidating to the first-time visitor. Don't be shy. Jump right in with a Hello, look for the Guide's name, and ask your question. More important, note that I received one immediate answer



to my question (from GWRepSteve, a member) and another the next day from Guide MO. I got just what I needed (*Alchemy* worked perfectly, and it's available online), and it only took 10 minutes.

Guides are on duty from 9 A.M. until 6 A.M. (Eastern time), 7 days a week, 365 days a year. To find a Guide, choose Lobby from the Go To menu, type Command-L, or select the People Connection icon from the Departments screen. If you need a Guide quickly, use the keyword: GuidePager.

## Members

All of this talk about Guides and Members Helping Members might give you the impression that members play a significant part in the operation of AOL, and you're right. Members are much more than AOL's source of income: they're contributors (most of the files in the data libraries discussed in Chapter 5, "Computing," are submitted by members), they're assistants, and, of course, they are the heart of the online community.

Since members play such an important role at AOL, it behooves us to spend a few pages discussing them: how to find them, the member profile and how to be a better member yourself.

## The Member Directory

America Online offers you the opportunity to post a voluntary member profile. Though I'll talk about profiles in a moment, the operative term in the previous sentence is "voluntary." America Online values the individual's privacy, and if you wish to remain secluded in the online community, you may do so. Those members who have completed a profile are listed in the Member Directory.

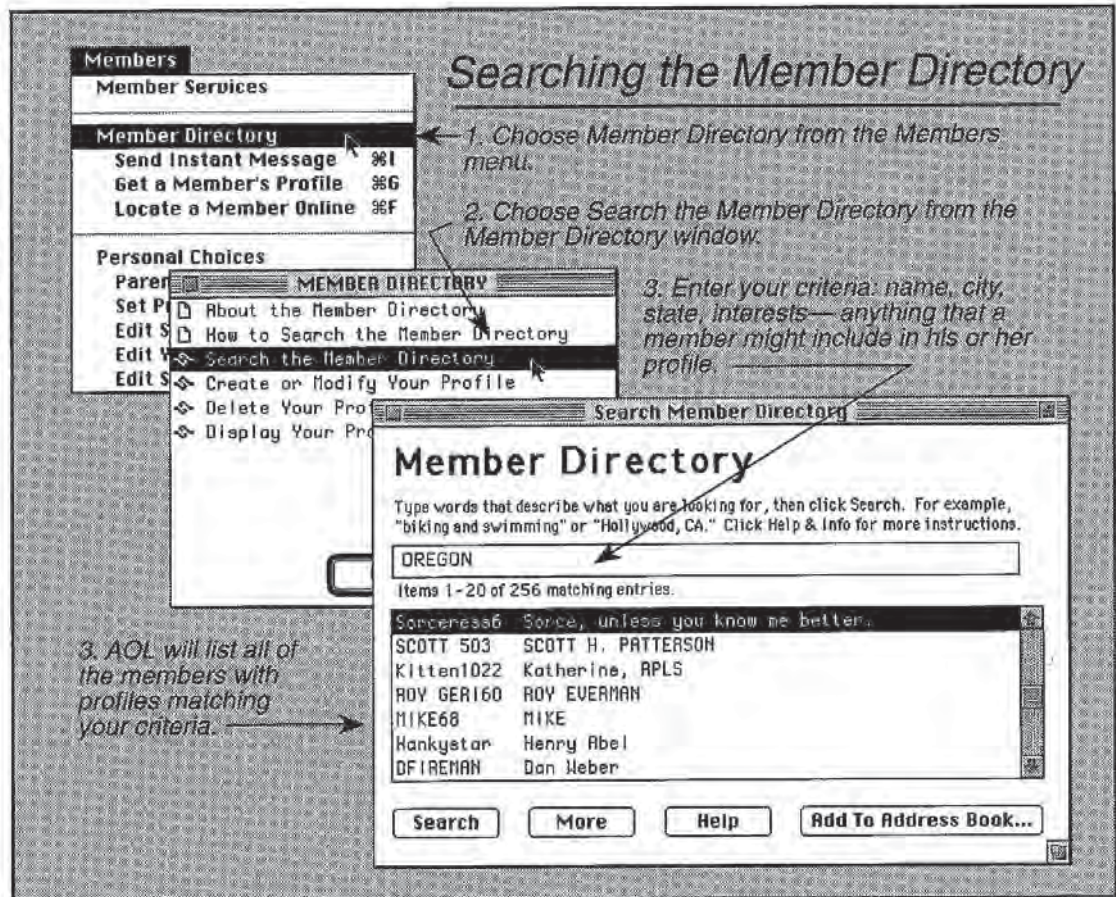
You can search for a member by real name, screen name or profile. You might see a screen name online and wonder who is behind it: Search the directory. You might wonder if a friend is signed up with AOL: Search the directory.

One of the more interesting things you can do with the directory is to search for people with interests similar to yours. Once you've found them, you can send them mail (I discuss electronic mail in Chapter 4) and, perhaps, strike up a friendship. It's all part of the electronic community.



I, for instance, enjoy the beauty of my state. I live just 13 miles from the Mount Hood National Forest, where hundreds of square miles of virgin forest, lakes, trails and meadows await the explorer. Thinking I might find someone to share my interest, I search the Member Directory for members in my locality by using Oregon as my criterion (Figure 3-12).

Figure 3-12: Much to my delight, 256 other Oregonians have posted their profiles. I'll send them some mail and see if they want to explore the forest someday.



Actually, Figure 3-12 is misleading. My search for "Oregon" omitted those members who used the state's two-character abbreviation ("OR") in their profiles. It also didn't include those members who have elected to omit their profiles. My guess is that there are thousands of AOL members from Oregon, many more than pictured in Figure 3-12. To access the Members Directory, choose Members Directory from the Members menu, then double-click Search the Members Directory option.



## Member Profiles

As I mentioned a moment ago, member profiles are optional. If you elect not to complete a profile, your name won't show up in searches like the one described above.

If that's your preference, you cut yourself out of a number of opportunities to become involved in the online community. If you elect to post a profile (or if you're already posted a profile and want to edit it), AOL provides a couple of ways for you to do so.

Look again at the menu pictured in Figure 3-12. Note that one of the options listed there is "Edit Your Online Profile." While this is one way to get the job done, a better way is to go through Member Services. You've got to be signed on in either case, but Member Services is free and choosing Edit Your Online Profile from the Members menu is not. Moreover, the Member Services route offers a few options that aren't available from the Members menu. You can also use the keyword: Profile. Both routes pass through the free curtain.

Once you choose either one of these methods, you'll see the window pictured at the bottom of Figure 3-3. Note the button labeled Accounts & Billing. Click it and follow the path identified in Figure 3-13.

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