NetMeter 2

What is NetMeter?

After the euphoria of surfing the world wide web and chatting with other cyberspace citizens we are often brought firmly back to reality by the size of the telephone bill and invoice from the internet service provider for our time online.

If you have ever been shocked by the size of the bills that have racked up when cruising the information superhighway, you need NetMeter. This program for Windows not only enables you to track your online time, but also provides an accurate estimate of the telephone, Internet Service Provider and combined costs.

Other utilities simply log the time you spend online, but are useless since you have no idea how much you will be charged for that time.

NetMeter's onscreen display will tell you second by second, exactly how much the current call is costing in pounds and pence, how much your Internet Service Provider (ISP) will charge you, how much free time (if relevant) is left and much more. It automatically adjusts the telephone charges according to the day and time - peak rate, off-peak and weekend - to give you an accurate estimate.

After entering your ISP charges and your telephone charges, NetMeter is ready. It logs your access times and the cost of each call, and can provide a monthly summary of the separate telephone and ISP charges and the total cost.

Keep NetMeter onscreen when you're online and you could save the cost of the program in the first month alone!

International issues

NetMeter was written for the UK market, but will probably be OK in many other countries as well. The calculations are identical, it's just the currency that will be different.

Requirements

NetMeter runs under Windows 3.1 or Windows 95 and there are no special requirements. It is small and takes up little memory. Your screen display should be set to small fonts or it might not display properly. (In Win 95, right click the mouse on the desktop, choose *Properties, Settings, Small Fonts.*)

Starting NetMeter

When NetMeter starts up it shows two panels - **This call** on the left and **This month** on the right. Selecting *Window, This call* shrinks the window to display only the **This call** panel.

(Selecting Window, Stay on top prevents the NetMeter window from being hidden by other programs, such as your web browser.)

The **This month** panel provides a summary of your Internet usage so far this month. (Actually, "this bill" would be a more accurate description, because you don't have to use calendar months, the billing date can be used instead of the 1st of the month). The first time you run this program, and on the first day of each month (or first day of the current billing period), this will be zero as a new empty log will automatically be started.

Also in the **This Month** panel are two bars. The top one shows how much free time is left. If you have unlimited internet access for a fixed fee, the bar will stay green. However, if your free time is limited, such as on MSN or AOL, the green bar will shrink as your free time is used up. When it is completely red there is no free time left and you'll be charged for any additional hours on the internet. It's rather like a car's fuel guage - when there's no free time left the guage reads empty and your Internet use will be very expensive. Watch out!

The bottom bar (another fuel guage-like display) is related to the budget. Select *Edit, Budget* and you'll be asked how much you want to spend on your internet access this month. Enter a number, such as 20 (which would mean you want to spend no more than £20 this month) and the bottom bar will display how much you have left to spend. It takes into account both the ISP and telephone charges.

When the bar has turned completely red you have spent up to your budget limit. You are not prevented from using the Internet and you can't lock out your kids or your company's employees; it's just a visual warning that you have spent more than you wanted to. You'll see a pop-up message warning you that you have spent all your allocated budget

The **This call** panel displays the time you log on and off the Internet, the duration of the current call and the cost. Also displayed is the minimum cost of a call (with BT you are charged a minimum of £0.05 for every call you make) and the current telephone charge rate in pence per minute.

Using NetMeter to record Internet usage
There are two ways of using NetMeter to record Internet use. By default, the Timer interface is selected and you'll see two buttons on the NetMeter form: *Start Timer* and *Stop Timer*. Connect to the internet in the usual manner and then click the *Start Timer* button. When you disconnect, click the *Stop Timer* button. You can select items on the Go menu to go to a particular web site.

The current cost of the telephone call is updated and displayed every second, and you can choose a different update period from the *Edit* menu. If you minimise NetMeter then the icon caption (and its entry in the Win 95 taskbar) contains the current cost of the call.

You can also select *Window, Stay on top* to prevent the NetMeter window from being hidden under your Web browser window. Tip: Start NetMeter, select *Window, Stay on top* then *Window, MiniMeter* and place the window in the top left hand corner of the screen. This leaves plenty of room onscreen for your Web browser, while still enabling you to keep an eye on the costs.

When you click the *Stop timer* button you'll be asked if you want to add this activity to the log file, click *Yes* if you do. If you don't, nothing will be recorded.

The other way of recording internet use is to select the Dialer interface from the *Edit* menu. Instead of *Start Timer* and *Stop Timer* buttons, you'll see *Connect* and *Disconnect* buttons. You can use NetMeter to connect to the Internet instead of your normal dialer program. Click the *Connect* button and a dialer standard form will be shown. Enter the telephone number, username and password then click *Connect*. (The Save checkbox will save this information so you don't have to enter it every time.) You will then be connected to your ISP and to the Internet. You don't need to enter anything into the System box, as this entry is filled in automatically.

Using the dialer means you never have to use the *Start Timer* and *Stop Timer* buttons - Internet usage is recorded automatically. Place a shortcut to NetMeter on the Windows 95 desktop and use it to connect to the Internet rather than your standard dialer. In this way, your internet access will be automatically logged.

Note: If you save your password, anyone will be able to log on to the Internet. Clear the Save checkbox to delete the password after using it. MSN, AOL and Compuserve use special software which works in a different way, so you may not be able to use NetMeter as a dialer to connect to these services. You need a standard ISP using the standard dialup Internet access software. Of course, you can still use NetMeter in manual mode to log your online access.

Tip: Select *Edit, Charges, Max call* to set the maximum amount you want to spend on a single Internet access call. The amount should be entered in pounds and pence, such as 0.50 for fifty pence. Next time you log on to the Internet, Netmeter will display a warning when you have spent your Max Call amount and will offer you the chance to log off immediately. You can, of course, choose to ignore this warning if you want - NetMeter does not force you to do anything, it merely offers advice.

The access log

A new log file is automatically started each month without you having to do anything (except make sure that the PC's internal date and time are correct!). Click on *File, Load Access Log* to see this month's log. It is a record of when you logged on to the internet and for how long, how much it cost each time and a summary of the total time and cost. You can load the log for any month by selecting it from the drop-down list and clicking the *Load* button. The currently displayed log file can be deleted by selecting *Delete* and it can be printed by selecting *Print*.

By default, a new log is started on the 1st of each month, however, our ISP bills usually depend on when we signed up for the service, so the bill could come at any time. On the main NetMeter form, choose *Edit, Charges, Billing date* to enter the day on which your ISP bill arrives.

If you enter 15 then the access log will record internet usage from 15th of one month to the 14th of the next month. Suppose it's August 10 and you select *File, Load Access Log*. The log displayed will be August's. However, if it is August 20th the log displayed is September's because today's internet usage will appear on the September 15th bill. This may be confusing at first, but you need to remember which month today's Internet access will appear on.

NetMeter handles all this automatically, so don't worry about it.

Select the *Chart* button to display the access logs graphically. Each month is shown as a vertical bar in 2D or 3D (click the *2D/3D* button to select). Click *Calls, Time, Phone Cost, ISP Cost* or *Total Cost* to see charts of these statistics.

The current call start time, duration and cost are automatically saved to disk every so often, so if you are browsing the web and the PC locks up for some reason and you have to switch off or reboot, the last call can still be added to the access log. The program will detect this and offer to add the call to the log - you just have to click *Yes* or *No* when prompted.

Note: There is one access log for each month, so after running NetMeter for 12 months all the log files will be full. You should then delete some of the oldest log files, otherwise this year's access will be added to last year's log. If you want to keep records of Internet usage for more than a year, create a backup directory and move the old log files into it.

Telephone Charges

NetMeter is already set up with the current BT charges and knows what the rate is for each day and time of day. If you use a BT line then you don't need to do anything (unless they change the charges). If your telephone is provided by a cable company or other supplier, then you'll almost certainly need to define the charges. Choose *Edit, Charges, Telephone* from the menu and a new dialog box will appear.

The standard weekday BT rate is 8am until 6pm costs 3.95p per minute and any other time it costs 1.65p per minute. (Please use the 24-hour time format, so that 8am is 0800 and 6pm is 1800). Here's how you would enter it...

The time in the first *Start* box should always be 0000, meaning 00:00am - the start of the day. At this time the cost is 1.65p per minute (because it's outside the peak rate 8am-6pm period). So enter 1.65 in the first *Cost* box. At 8am the rate changes to 3.95p per minute, so in the second *Start* box enter 0800 and the rate of 3.95 in the second *Cost* box. At 6pm it changes back to 1.65p per minute, so in the third boxes enter 1800 and 1.65. Leave the other boxes blank because you don't need them.

```
Start Time     Pence per minute
 ------           ------
| 0000 |         | 1.65 |
 ------           ------
| 0800 |         | 3.95 |
 ------           ------
| 1800 |         | 1.65 |
 ------           ------
|      |         |      |
 ------           ------
|      |         |      |
 ------           ------
```

At weekends there is just one rate of 1p per minute. Therefore in the first box for Saturday you would enter 0000 (the start of the day) and 1 for the cost. All the other boxes should be blank because there is no change in the rate. Sunday is exactly the same.

Note that BT has a minimum charge of 5p for a call. So even if your online for only a few seconds, it will cost you 5p. There is a box to enter this minimum charge.

ISP Charges
Your internet service provider (ISP) will either charge you a flat rate for unlimited access, or make a small charge for a small number of free hours and then subsequent hours are charged at a fixed rate per hour. You can enter this information by choosing *Edit, Charges, ISP* from the main menu.

If you have unlimited access for a fixed flat rate fee, such as £11.50 per month, then enter 999 for the hours (because 999 is the maximum number of hours you can enter) and 11.50 for the fixed cost. The other two boxes should be left blank:

```
-----              -------
| 999 | hours   £ | 11.50 | fixed cost
-----              -------
|     | hours @ £ |       | per hour
-----              -------
```

Some ISP's, such as AOL, charge £5 per month, give you 5 hours free online time, and then anything over 5 hours is charged at a fixed rate of, for example, £1.85 per hour. This would be entered like so:

```
-----              -------
| 5   | hours   £ | 5.00  | fixed cost
-----              -------
| 999 | hours @ £ | 1.85  | per hour
-----              -------
```

So the first 5 hours cost £5, and thereafter it is £1.85 (remember that the maximum number of hours is 999).

The Go menu
Here you'll find five menu options which you can define yourself by selecting *Edit, Go menu*. They are a handy list of your favourite web sites thet you can access when using NetMeter. Once you're online, you can start the timer to measure your online charges and select any website on the *Go* menu to go to. Selecting them when you're not online will probably call up your dialler to connect to the internet, then start your default browser to load the page requested.

Restore Defaults
This option on the Edit menu will reset the ISP and telephone charges, and the Go website list. It's handy if you've made changes you wish you hadn't. If you really mess things up, just delete the files ISPcost.txt, TelCost.txt, Budget.txt and websites.txt - NetMeter will create them if they aren't found.

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