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All about Bulletin Boards

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Bulletin Boards (or BBs) are one of the most widely used forms of communication on the Internet. A BB is a place where like-minded people can meet and discuss various topics they are interested in. Think of BBs as an interactive online town hall meeting. There is a BB for every activity you might be interested in. There are BBs that range from discussing new video games to helping brides find the place to buy a wedding dress. Although e-mail is more widely used as a form of communication, BBs are important because an actual discussion can take place between a group of individuals in a clear and concise manner.

Many BBs, after a short time, develop into a community. The members of this community are not unlike a small town where everyone knows everyone else inside and out. Most of the time, BB members have never met in real life. Nearly any online community will have its own standards, rules, etiquette, and lingo. In this article I’ll try to cover some of this etiquette and terminology that is common to most BBs. Also, I’ll try to point you towards some good resources for setting up your own BB.

History:

In 1978, before the Internet was available to the public, the first online bulletin board system (BBS) was created. Named CBBS (Computerized Bulletin Board System), the system was developed in Chicago by Ward Christensen and Randy Seuss. In 1979, they opened their system to the public. People would use their modem with their computer to dial a number that would connect them to the BBS. The system worked by allowing people to “post” messages to a “board.” Other people could in turn write a reply to this message. This series of posts and replies became known as a “thread.” These threads became an ongoing, online discussion.

In the 1980s, as computer prices dropped and modems became widely used, people started up their own local BBSs. Hundreds of these BBSs evolved into miniaturized versions of the Internet.
Along with being able to start an online conversion, some BBSs had online, turn-based games (such as Tradewars) that people could play. BBS members could also send e-mails within the BBS to other members. Some BBSs had files for download and even simplistic chat programs.

The spread of the World Wide Web (WWW) brought the BBS to virtual extinction. There were still a few here and there, but most people began using the Internet as their major form of online communication since it had so much more breadth. The BBS however, found new life on the WWW. People started forming BBs on the web, which had an even greater user base. Anyone in the world could access any public BB and they didn’t need to dial into the BB, they only had to dial into their Internet Service Provider. Users had instant access to hundreds of BBs instead of just one.

Today, BBs might contain tens of thousands of members, or perhaps just a few. One of the largest, traditional BBs, the Usenet, is still widely popular today. The Usenet contains thousands of “groups” where people can share their thoughts and ideas with other members of a particular topic area.

**Terminology:**

Before you start getting into the world of BBs, you may want to learn a bit about the lingo that goes around. Most of it will seem strange, but once you get the hang of it, you too will be ROFL with everyone else. Listed below are some of the most common terms and acronyms will find across most BBs.

**Acronyms and abbreviations:**

- **BTW:** *By the way*
- **CU, CYA:** *See you (as in “See you later!”)*
- **FUBAR:** *Fouled up beyond all recognition*
- **FYI:** *For your information*
- **IMO:** *In my opinion*
- **IMHO:** *In my humble opinion*
- **IRL:** *In real life*
- **JK or J/K:** *Just kidding*
KISS: Keep it simple, stupid

L8R: Later

LMAO: Laughing my ass off

LOL: Laugh out loud (probably the most used acronym of all)

OMG: Oh my goodness

OIC: Oh, I see

RL: Real life

ROTFL or ROFL: Rolling on the floor, laughing

RTFM: Read the frickin’ manual!

THX or TNX: Thanks

Other Terms:

User Name: Your ‘handle’ that others will know you by. Usually, this isn’t your real life name.

Profile: When you sign up to use a BBS, you must submit a bit of information about yourself, such as your home state, e-mail addresses, and interests. This is known as your “profile.”

Moderator: The moderators are the people who are in charge of a board. They usually have the power to remove or change topics, remove users from the board, and usually act the board police.

Troll: A post that is supposed to anger others, or elicit specific responses from other board members. The community usually ridicules such posts. This term stems from fishing (IE trolling for fish). People also refer to the ‘troll’ as the mythical creature. User say things like “Go back under your bridge, troll” and “Don’t feed the trolls.”

Flame: A post that intentionally insults another user. A long thread of flames may referred to as a “flame war.”

Flamer: One who posts a flame post.

Lurk: Lurking is the act of reading a BBS for a long period of time without actually being
involved in the discussion (IE posting messages, replies, etc).

**Lurker:** One who lurks on a message board.

**Spam:** A useless post

**Newbie:** A person who is new to the board.

**noob:** A person who is new, but has done something that goes against the grain of the board. noob has a negative connotation to it.


**Emoticons:**

Have you ever seen someone type “:)” in an email? Chances are, they were smiling at you. Emoticons are expressions made from punctuation. You have to tilt your head to see it, but the colon makes the eyes, and the parenthesis makes the smile. Below is a list of the most common emoticons.

- Happy, smile, etc.
- Sad, frown, etc.
- Indifferent
- Wink
- Surprise
- Devilish smile
- Smile with glasses
- Another version of smile
- Smiley with a nose

As you can see, there are hundreds of combinations of punctuation to get the effect you want. Check out [http://www.cknow.com/faqs/What/Emoticons.html](http://www.cknow.com/faqs/What/Emoticons.html) for a complete list of emoticons.

**BB Netiquette:**
Bulletin boards are like any other “real-life” community that has its own set of rules and etiquette. Before you step into an online discussion there are a few rules you should follow.

1. Be a lurker at first. While lurking may sound bad, it really isn’t. In fact, most BBS members would prefer if everyone lurked a little while before they join into a conversation. Lurking will let you get a feel for what the other users are like and how the community works. Remember, not all BBs will act in the same way.
2. Read the Board’s Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) and rules.
3. If you are looking for an answer to a question, use the search function first. Most BBs have a way to search through old posts, and if you are asking a basic question, the odds are it’s already been answered.
4. Never make a “Spam” post. Make sure your posts are thoughtful and useful.
5. AVOID USING ALL CAPS. It gives the appearance that you are shouting and will probably offend most users.
6. Make sure you subject header and message is clear and to the point. This means adding proper punctuation, grammar, etc. Otherwise, people may flame you or ignore your message all together.

For more on Netiquette, check out: [http://www.albion.com/netiquette/](http://www.albion.com/netiquette/)

**The Usenet**

One of the most popular, widely used and longest running BBs on the Internet is the Usenet. While some people access the Usenet through a variety of client programs, Google.com has recently given free web access to the Usenet at [http://groups.google.com](http://groups.google.com).

The Usenet is a worldwide distributed discussion system. The Usenet contains “Newsgroups” that are classified by subject. These Newsgroups act a BB forum where people can post messages, ask questions, start discussions and interact with other members.

Since the Usenet is so large, it may be hard to find which Newsgroup to post messages in. The best way is to use Google’s search function and search for some key words that pertain to a topic you are interested in. For example, I searched for “motorcycle” and was treated with 1,120,000 results. However, the newsgroup alt.motorcycle.sportbike was given as a suggested newsgroup, as were four groups under the classification rec.motorcycle.* (the star means there are more specialized groups within this hierarchy). I could post messages in any one of these newsgroups about motorcycles and feel confident I was in the right place.

Another nice feature of Google’s newsgroup listing is that they have archives the past 20 years of newsgroup posts, with over 700 million messages. Sometimes, I find if I have a question, I can find the answer faster by searching the newsgroups than searching the web. The sheer volume of information contained on the Usenet is unbelievable.
Thinking about setting up your own BB?

There are many kinds of web-based BB systems that are free to use for anyone that has access to a server capable of CGI (common gateway interface) functions. If you have access, you’re in business. If you’re not sure, you might want to ask your ISP (Internet Service Provider) about their CGI policy for their users. If you’re on campus, ask your technology office their CGI policy for faculty and students.

This isn’t intended to be a tutorial on how to set up a BB. There are too many different flavors; each with their own set up which might be vastly different than the next. However, with a few hours (at the most) and some basic technical knowledge, setting up any particular BB shouldn’t be that difficult. Always read the documentation before installing any BB.

Since there are so many free BBs out there, I’ll try to narrow it down to a few BBs that are fairly easy to maintain and set up. Keep in mind that most of these are free to use for non-profit or academic organizations. Also keep in mind that a Unix based server is needed to run most of these.

**phpBB:** [http://www.phpbb.com/](http://www.phpbb.com/) - phpBB is an Open Source (read: free) bulletin board with great administrative controls and awesome security. Anyone wanting to set up phpBB will need PHP installed on his or her server, as well as mySQL, a database solution that works hand in hand with PHP. If PHP and mySQL are already present, then setting up this BB should be no problem.

**Ikonboard:** [http://www.ikonboard.com/](http://www.ikonboard.com/) - We use an older version of Ikonboard here at the Berglund Center. A newer, cleaner version has just been released. Ikonboard has a slick interface and is easy to maintain. This is another BB with great security as well. The older version of Ikonboard was fairly easy to set up, and I’m guessing version 3.0 will be even better.

**YaBB:** [http://www.yabbforum.com/](http://www.yabbforum.com/) - YaBB (Yet another bulletin board) has become the favorite of many BB board administrators. YaBB is very flexible and has many “mods” and templates to change the way the BB looks. Perl is needed to run this BBS, but comes with most Unix machines by default.

**YaBB SE:** [http://www.yabb.info/](http://www.yabb.info/) - The PHP port of YaBB. Some people prefer using a PHP based BB over a Perl based BB. Again, PHP and mySQL are needed to run this BB.


**Conclusion**
I hope this has helped you get a feel for what communicating via a BB is like. Using a BB takes some getting used to, but in the end it can be a real blast, as well as being extremely useful. You may have some difficulties at first, or find that others are being difficult, but remember, never forget that the person on the other side is human.

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