

Internet Interpet

The Net Pet Nanny

About four years ago, one of our fellow parrotheads unveiled a new technological twist to the love of his Eclectus—appropriately named Widget—which allowed him to keep an eye on his bird at home while he was at work or on the road. Being single, he had to leave the bird caged during the day and being a high ranking executive, he often put in long hours.

Though he was not a Net nerd or computer geek, he had assembled a simple web cam, put a small server under his sink in the kitchen where he kept Widget in the sun during the day and set up a small private website that only he could tap into from his office computer, personal digital assistant or even his Internet capable phone. He could keep a bird's eye view on Widget at any time.

We've always been amazed and touched by his devotion to Widget but we jokingly warned him not to reveal to potential girlfriends that he had a webcam setup in his house as they might fear that he also had cameras in other places, which he wouldn't, being the gentleman and bird lover he is.

He was ahead of his time but now, using webcam technology is ubiquitous in keeping an eye on pets of all types, check up on petsitters or the schedule of dog-walkers as well as being a tool of doggy day care centres and kennels to offer a service to their clientele. Since the technology is so simple now, webcams are cheap and broadband connection so fast, it's easy to set up a Net Nanny service without being a techie.

The first step is to find a computer that will act as the host and it's easy to find an old model Mac or PC that will fit the bill. You might have one lurking in your closet when you upgraded or can find a used machine on the market for a song. But it should be a computer made later than 2000 to have the memory and capacity to store and transmit images as well as handling the software. Macs offer 'plug and play' technology with the Apple iSight camera, or a simple Logitech webcam, and software with a price range of \$45-\$200 depending on choice. Both PCs & Macs will require webcam software and this usually comes with the camera.

Webcams come with different speeds in frames per second and resolution in pixels—the higher the better in both cases. But the more pixels and frames per second, the greater the need for speed and memory. This is where the choice of streaming real time motion or settling for images shot every few seconds or minutes comes into play.

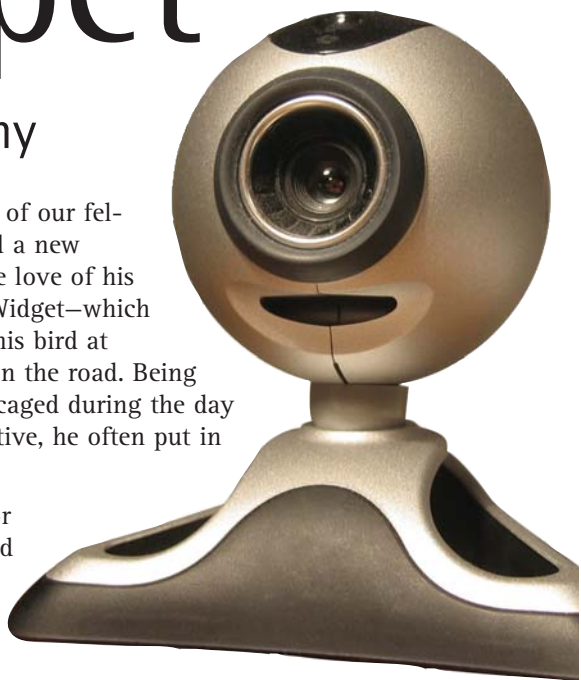
The next step is the connection to the Internet, either dialup or broadband will be required at both the host and viewing locations. In between you will also need a dedicated website, or the area of an existing website, which can be accessible remotely. If you do not have one already you'll find most ISPs (Internet Service Providers, eg. Bigpond, AAPT, Ozemail) offer web hosting services—it pays to shop around and also inquire what the charges if you exceed your bandwidth. If you already have your own website, you can add a link that not only allows you to watch your pets but also share them with others.

It's possible to use a webcam with a dialup Internet service, though this will limit you to viewing time refreshed snapshots as opposed to realtime streaming which is best achieved through a broadband connection. With streaming video, you can easily check that the lighting is adequate, aim and focus is correct and that your files are being uploaded properly to make the setup work from the webpage.

There may be a bit of tweaking involved to get the speed, resolution and transmission in sync but there are add ons including audio and storage of images over a period of time to go back and review footage. You can also add extra cameras and automatic switching to cover more than one room. Adding pan or zoom is the next step up, but it starts getting expensive at that point.

This not only makes the webcam setup ideal for watching pets at play (or mischief) it also lets you see if that petsitter you're paying is just sitting around or actually engaging your fur or feather children in active play. The side benefit is that it also can be used as a remote surveillance device that allows you to monitor your property while away. But make sure that you don't expose too much on camera as webcams can be very public and you'd hate to be on Australia's Funniest Home Videos by accident!

HELP: There is an excellent article online on How to Set Up a Live Webcam at <http://webdesign.about.com/cs/multimedia/a/aawebcams.htm>



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