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An Online Shortcut to Traffic School

Courts: For \$34, some offenders can study and take a test on the Internet. Officials say the program is the first of its kind.

March 21, 1997 | BOB POOL | TIMES STAFF WRITER

Speeders beware: Racing on the information superhighway won't be allowed at computer traffic school.

That seemed to be the verdict in a downtown courtroom Thursday as judicial officials and computer technicians switched on what they say is the country's first traffic school on the Internet.

Motorists in some parts of the Los Angeles area who want to erase traffic tickets from their driving record can now take an eight-hour course and a 75-question test over the World Wide Web instead of going to class in person.

But being interactive won't exactly be instantaneous, acknowledged officials of the Sherman Oaks-based computer company that is offering the new service.

Plenty of mail is involved. And they're talking U.S. mail, not e-mail.

Motorists signing up for traffic school will rely on the Postal Service to deliver enrollment forms, accompanied by \$34 checks, to the OnLine Interactive Home Study Program Co.

After they study traffic laws on their computer screen and make a printout of the test, motorists will also use the Postal Service to send in their answers.

Letter carriers will deliver certificates of completion to the court for those who pass. They will also deliver a copy of the certificate to the motorist's home.

Only motorists cited within the cities of Los Angeles and San Fernando and on Santa Catalina Island will be eligible to use the Internet traffic school, said Fritz Ohlrich, administrator for the Los Angeles Judicial District.

But if the program proves popular, Los Angeles County's 23 other judicial districts are likely to climb online, too, he said.

"It will provide easy access for our customers--it will be very convenient for the working professional, the handicapped," said Mel Red Recana, presiding judge of the Los Angeles Municipal Court.

Officials say two other home-study traffic schools--one with videotapes and the other with printed materials--have been in use in Los Angeles for the last three years. There are about 500 lecture-type schools as well.

While most traditional traffic schools don't administer tests, they are required for home classes. "The overall goal of traffic school is to educate people," said Municipal Court Judge Stephen Marcus, chairman of the court's Alternative Sentencing Committee.

Court officials said searches of the World Wide Web have found no other Internet traffic schools. They said one program being tried in Ventura County requires motorists to use a rented terminal connected by telephone to Texas to answer questions while they watch instructional videotapes.

Lisa Riches, head of OnLine Interactive Home Study, said motorists can find the enrollment form at her company's Web site at www.onlinetraffic.com.

Riches, 30, of Sherman Oaks, said the idea for the computer program came after she had problems with a home-study course after her last traffic ticket.

"I never got the study manual and I couldn't remember the name of the company to call," she explained. "I had to go through the court to find it. I got very close to my court due date before I finished."

Company spokesman Marc Lawrence said traffic offenders have 45 days to take the course and must correctly answer 60 of the test questions in order to pass. Those who fail can repeat the program at no charge.

He said company employees will be available to answer e-mail inquiries from motorists enrolled in the program.

Lawrence said that sound effects included in the Internet traffic school curriculum will make the program entertaining for computer buffs. "Listen to this," he said, clicking the computer mouse on the image of a truck horn on the screen. A tiny beep-beep echoed through the courtroom.

"A book can't have little horns blowing for you."