

Internet service providers and hardware manufacturers provide high-speed connections so you can surf more swiftly



PHOTODISC

Cruising the Web at Warp Speed

TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

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Once you're comfortable cruising the Internet, one of the first questions you'll ask is: How can I go faster? Fortunately, several Internet service providers and hardware manufacturers have responded to the clamor for high-speed Internet connections with hardware and line connections that make the typical 56K modem seem prehistoric.

Currently, the two primary high-speed Internet alternatives — commonly known as "broadband Internet" — are cable and digital subscriber lines (DSL). While there are other contenders — satellites and Integrated Services Digital Networks (ISDN) — neither is significantly faster than a standard 56K modem. Given that you already have or will soon have a choice between cable and DSL, it doesn't make sense to get involved with satellite or ISDN.

One of the easiest services to link to is high-speed Internet cable. Offering speeds up to 50 times faster than a 56K modem, high-speed cable is available in select markets and is generally provided through local cable TV companies. Linking to it involves little more than hooking a cable modem to your PC.

High-speed Internet cable is also relatively inexpensive. After installation fees, which range from \$99 to \$175, basic cable modem service can be had for as little as \$39 per month. For more information, check out companies like @HomeNetwork (www.home.com) to see if you happen to be lucky enough to be located in one of the markets serviced by cable modem companies.

Cable Internet access can also be extremely quick. Some cable companies promise download speeds of up to 8,000 Kbps. Compared to a 56K

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modem, such speeds seem lightning charged.

Unfortunately, the downside of high-speed Internet cable is that speeds vary. Generally, access speeds drop during peak usage hours. The more people who use the system, the slower your access will be.

Currently, the primary alternative to cable is DSL service. Provided by local telephone companies, DSL lines can be 25 times faster or more than a 56K modem. Not surprisingly, prices vary. But generally, users should expect to pay around \$100 for line installation, and a \$30 to \$120 monthly fee for service, depending on speed.

Unfortunately, the high speeds promised by DSL also vary. But with DSL, access speed is generally less dependent on the number of local users on the system and more dependent on your physical proximity to what is referred to as the DSL provider's central office. At distances of less than 12,000 feet, for example, you should be able to get download speeds of up to 8,000K, according to the DSL forum. But at more than 20,000 feet, expect 256K downloads at best.

Establishing a link involves installing an ethernet card in your PC (NetGear by Bay Networks is a reliable card), and hooking your PC to a DSL modem. The modem interfaces with a standard telephone line, which is augmented with a special jack that's installed by your DSL service technician.

Like high-speed cable, DSL is a tempting invitation to the Internet's fast lane. But be forewarned: DSL installations can be tricky, and it's a good idea to bulletproof your DSL installation before the service technician ever darkens your door. First and foremost, size up the competition: You can get a list of DSL providers for your community at www.getspeed.com.

You'll also need an ethernet card, and it's best to verify with your DSL Internet Service Provider which card is best for your PC and its service. Any local PC store can easily install an ethernet card. You can also do the installation yourself by removing your PC's protective shell, and plugging



the ethernet card into the appropriate slot.

Moreover, you should also be sure to demand "always on" DSL service, or a connection that is live 24 hours a day and seven days a week. At an average of \$50 or more per month, you shouldn't have to settle for a limited DSL connection.

If possible, you'll also want to verify that your PC works well with DSL. For example, test your PC on a friend's DSL connection, if possible. The reason: Occasionally, if you're not getting the DSL access speeds you were promised, a DSL installer may blame the performance problem on your PC (surprise). If you can prove your PC works fine on another DSL connection, your service tech will have to knuckle down and troubleshoot the connection.

Moreover, when readying for a DSL connection, you'll want to keep a clean machine. Translation: The fewer additional appliances plugged into the same surge protector as your DSL modem, the better. Sometimes, a non-computer appliance sharing a surge protector with a poorly shielded DSL cable modem, for example, can degrade the connection.

Whether you choose cable or DSL, you should put the tech support department of your potential provider through its paces before you sign. Often, smaller eager-to-please cable or DSL providers will run circles around their monolithic counterparts with faster and more efficient customer service. Do a little homework now to save headaches later.

It's also a good idea to be personal with your salesperson. Use the personal e-mail address of your salesperson to document in e-mail any ongoing problems with your

service, for example. The written history will come in handy if you decide your provider is not working for you, and you want to bail.

As with most things high-tech, detailed research before you commit never hurts. For more insights, check out www.dsreports.com, www.dslife.com, www.dslprime.com, www.cable-modem.net, www.cablemodemhelp.com and www.speedguide.net.

You'll also find that your local Internet club can be one of the best sources of info for how local cable and DSL services operate. Enter the keywords "Internet club" (and your town) on any popular search engine for links to the friendly propeller heads in your area.

A final note: Be aware that "going broadband" unfortunately offers cyber ne'er-do-wells unfettered access to your



PC. Whether you're connected via DSL or cable, your PC will be hooked to your provider's network 24/7, offering Internet hackers nothing but time to crack into your PC if they choose.

You can frustrate all but the most hyper-diligent of these pranksters by adding firewall security protection between your system and your 'Net connection with programs like Zone Alarm (www.zonelabs.com), Norton Personal Firewall (www.symantec.com/product/hom-is.html) and Black Ice Defender (www.networkice.com). ■

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