

Finding the Right Internet Service Provider

by Katherine Chaitin

One of the fastest-growing cottage industries in technology is that of Internet Service Provider (ISP). Along with software companies, communications firms, and online service providers, individuals are finding that they can offer Internet access, and many are doing so. This document provides some questions you can ask to help you find the right ISP for your needs. Feel free to share it, retaining credits, please, and the integrity of the document.

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1. Figure out what you want

Before you make that first call, the most important thing is to sit down and figure out exactly what you want to do on the Internet. Someone who really only wants to send and receive email will be looking for a different kind of service than someone who wants to browse the Web and set up his or her own Web pages. Think about the following:

What kind of services are you looking for:

- Email? — if you have email at work, you might want a separate account for personal email.
- FTP (File Transfer Protocol) — especially useful for sending and receiving large text files and software — including the ability to download files through your Web browser via FTP.
- Graphical Web interface?
- Space to create your own web pages?
- Someone to create those pages for you?
- An Internet connection alone or a full online

service with its own information?

- A link to local information? — look for a community network in your area. Try:
<http://www.cais.com/morino/htdocs/pand.htm>
- What time(s) you think you'll most likely be logging in. Evening? Weekends?
- Whether this is for work or personal use— if it's for work you might need more space, a dedicated line, faster tech support, better back-up, etc.
- What kind of equipment you have—can it handle a graphical Web interface?
- Is your modem at least 14.4? If not, transferring images will be slow and painful.

For most of the following questions, there are no “right” or even “better” answers. What is best for each customer depends on his own needs. Many people may not want or need the most comprehensive service and may want to ask more detailed questions to avoid paying for services that would not be used. A good way to start is to ask around — ask your friends, co-workers, and local users' groups. A list of worldwide user groups is available at:

<http://www.melbpc.org.au/others/index.htm>

2. Connectivity

This section is technical, but spending a bit of time on it will help ensure you get a decent connection. Ask the vendor's sales team to explain — if they can't or are unwilling, that will tell you something about their service too. There are some points that can cause bottlenecks when connecting to the Internet through an ISP. The first is your modem and its speed, as well as the size and setup of the vendor's modem pool. Next is the ISP's server and how powerful it is. The third is the ISP's own connection to the Internet. More people dialing into a provider means their server and their con-

nection need to be faster and more powerful.

- What sort of connection does the vendor have to the Internet? A T-1 is faster (1.544mbps) than a 56kbps line, and a T-3 is fastest. The faster the connection, the more quickly your pages (especially images) will load. A 56kbps connection is probably fine for most people, but if you're looking for a graphical Web connection, you wouldn't want it slower.

- How many modems do they have? (and how many customers?) If they have two modems and 100 customers trying to dial in, you're going to get a busy signal a lot of the time. Ask if they have a "no busy signal" policy i.e., a commitment to add more modems as their customer base expands.

Test it out. Get the phone number of the modem bank for whatever speed modem you own (or plan to own) and just call it on the telephone. Call around the time of day you think you'd be dialing in; call several times. If you get consistent busy signals or rings with no answer, that tells you something. If the modem picks up, that's good! (You'll hear a tone similar to the sound of a fax machine.)

- Do they have a local and toll-free dial-in number? You most certainly do not want to be paying long-distance or toll charges on top of your connection costs. If you travel a lot and plan to dial in from other locations, check if they have an 800 number or local numbers in other places. Check the front of your phonebook to make sure there are no zone charges for that prefix.

- How powerful is the server and how many users are on it? This is a tough one to give hints on, but basically the issue is response time — once you've connected to their server, how long is it before your typed command takes effect (e.g., how long after you type "mail" does it take for the mail program to start up)?

- Where do they keep the server you'll be dialing into? (Garages can be damp and moisture can crash a system.)

- Do they have a backup power supply?

- If one piece of hardware breaks down, how will they handle it? Is there backup equipment or are they running full out all the time?

3. Type of Internet services

- What range of Internet services do they offer and does it match your needs? If your main interest is in email, you might want a different service than someone who wants to view images using a Web browser.

- If the service is "full access," is it text-based or a graphical

interface? A vendor can say they provide access to the World Wide Web but if it's via a text-based interface such as Lynx, you will not get the images you'd see with a graphical browser such as Netscape. If your machine can't handle a graphical browser, a text-based interface is good.

- What Web browser do they use? If it's a proprietary browser (i.e., one they developed in-house), will it be able to handle some of the more recent Netscape extensions?

- Can their browser handle more advanced forms?

- Can it handle tables and colors?

- How often do they upgrade and update their browser software?

- What kind of support is available for their browser?

- Do they provide a variety of access options?

- Are they an online service provider? If so, what other types of information do they provide — chat groups? online resources?

- How many of the newsgroups do they make available? Are there any restrictions?

- What are their busy times of day? (i.e., when do most of their customers log in?)

4. Types of Accounts

- Do they give you an account on their machine? If so, how much space will you have? Can you download files into that space?

- Do they run their own Web server? If so, do you get your own space? Can you create pages? Again, how much space do you get and how is it priced?

- What email program do they use?

- Do they have rules about what may and may not be published?

- Are there restrictions on what accounts may and may not be used for?

- Do they have any policy regarding privacy of material stored on their system?

5. Rates

- Do they offer a variety of service plans?
- What are their hook-up or setup charges?
- What if you only want email, is that possible (and cheaper)?
- Is there a time-limit on the number of hours you can log on?
- Is there a way to buy more hours?
- Do they have a high-volume plan?
- Do they have off-hours rates?
- Do they charge for technical support? What are the rates?

6. Technical Support

Some feel this is the most important area of all. It might be worth asking for a list of current customers whom you could call and talk to about their tech support experiences. Also, test it out — call their tech support with some questions at a time of day you expect to be using their service.

- How easy is it to reach them on the phone?
- How pleasant and helpful are they? Remember, if they're too busy to be helpful to a potential customer, how do you think they'll treat someone who's already paid?
- What kind of technical support do they provide?
- How many people do they have on their support staff?
- What are their hours? Do they match the busy login times?
- Which problems and questions arise most often?
- Is there a phone number to call?
- Is there online help of any kind?
- Do they provide classes?
- Will they help you install and configure the initial software?
- Will they assist with Internet problems?
- Which of these do they charge for and how much?

7. Company History

- How long have they been around?
- How many customers do they have and how fast are they growing?

- What experience do they have in running an online service?
- Is it their own service or do they buy from another provider and resell?
- What are their plans to upgrade/expand their equipment to meet the needs of a growing customer base? It's nice to be with a growing company, but you want to be sure they can handle the calls, both technically and with the level of customer support you want. **M**

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