

# TECH talk

## FINDING THE RIGHT INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDER FOR YOUR COMPANY

By Ashok Kalle

Whether you are using e-mail, viewing a web site or downloading files, the Internet is everywhere – a convenient, user-friendly communications medium that every organization absolutely must have access to. So the question arises: who can I trust to provide me and my company with critical Internet service? How do I choose a dependable Internet Service Provider (ISP)? With hundreds of communications providers out there, choosing the right ISP is not easy and it's important that you begin your search with careful investigation.

The best place to start your research for an ISP are the specialty GTA computer papers such as "Toronto Computes", "The Computer Paper", and "We Compute". Most reputable ISPs tend to advertise their services there and, occasionally, these publications also publish a fairly detailed list of all GTA-based ISPs. Many major daily newspapers are also a source of information as they will often carry ISP advertisements. If you already have access to the Web, use it to search for a suitable ISP on the Internet itself. Virtually every ISP has their own website with information on the access plans they offer.

Perhaps the most reliable way to find an ISP you can trust is through word of mouth. Ask colleagues and/or friends for the names of ISPs they have used in the past and ask what kind of service they have received.

Most ISPs offer similar products - access to the Internet, with the key difference being price and the level of customer service. Simply put, an ISP has a large, high-speed connection to the Internet. The ISP's job is to make it easier for users such as your company to access and use this Internet connection by providing valuable additional services such as, your account set up, domain name hosting, technical support, billing, file back up and storage and security.

Your primary choice lies between choosing

a smaller, local ISP or a large regional or national player. Each has their strengths and weaknesses and there are specific advantages in choosing a local ISP as your Internet provider. Local ISPs tend to cater specifically to the community they reside in. And, because they are smaller, they offer better service and more attractive prices.

Larger Internet providers typically have higher overheads and tend to pass on these costs to their users. Unfortunately, in these difficult economic times many large providers have had difficulty staying afloat and have ended up out of business. Most smaller Internet providers, meanwhile, have kept their costs down and continue to survive, thrive and grow. Smaller providers tend to focus on offering better service, as they are more aware of the importance of retaining every customer's loyalty.

Whether you decide on a small or large ISP your provider should offer you a certain number of hours of Internet access included with your account, an e-mail address, access to the Web, Internet news and space to host your own web site. ISPs will differ in terms of payment rates, the area covered, hours when technical customer support is available, special or additional features offered and how long they've been in business.

When you've narrowed down your choices, get first-hand information by talking to current users. Or call the ISP directly and ask questions: How often has the service gone down in the past three to six months, and for how long? How often does one receive busy signals if dialing in? How long does one have to wait on hold to reach a Customer Service Technician? How quickly are you called back if you leave a message? Are the Customer Service Technicians knowledgeable and helpful? Also ask what makes the ISP different from others and reasons why you should sign up with them. Along with basic features, find out what features they offer exclusively.

What new services has the ISP launched recently? It is also important to find out how long the ISP has been in business.

How much should you pay for service? Remember that you always get what you pay for. If the price you are paying seems too good to be true, then it usually is. Many people try to save on costs by purchasing a bundled service (Internet access, local and long distance phone package in one). This is convenient in the sense that you will only receive one bill per month but this makes it difficult for you to switch to another provider if you are not happy with one of the services provided. Also if you shop around, you can usually find the same service, available separately at a more competitive price.

Once you've chosen your ISP, you have a choice of Internet connections to make: dial-up or "dedicated" access. A dial up connection is one where you use a modem to dial in and connect to your ISP. This is ideal for small organizations where people can live with one person connecting to the Internet at a time. Although access speed is lower – up to 56Kb/s, the connection serves its purpose if you only need to access e-mail and Web sites on an intermittent basis. It is also extremely inexpensive - anywhere from \$9<sup>95</sup> to \$29<sup>95</sup> a month for limited access.

If your company has more than ten employees, and staff make extensive use of the Internet for e-mail or Web access, it's almost certain that you will need a dedicated or "always on" connection. Such a fast, full time connection allows all employees in your office to connect simultaneously to the Internet using ISDN or DSL technology at speeds ranging between 128Kb/s and 3.0 Mb/s. With faster connections come higher costs. A dedicated ISDN or DSL connection typically cost between two and four hundred dollars a month, but is extremely fast and reliable and can be shared among up to a hundred employees. The cost per user connected to the Internet, therefore drops drastically. Dedicated connections also allow you to run your own Internet services on site such as, your own mail, Web and FTP servers.

Remember, examine your options carefully before choosing your Internet Service Provider. Your connection to the world outside depends on it. ☺

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