

# Small Business

CANADA MAGAZINE

## TECHNOLOGY

### Choosing the Right ISP

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**Y**OUR BUSINESS cannot do without the Internet today. Whether you are sending and receiving email, downloading files or accessing websites, the Internet has become an integral part of business for virtually every organization. This raises an array of important questions, the most important being: who can I trust to provide my company and me with Internet service I can rely on? With hundreds of Internet Service Providers seeking your account with a wide range of offering, choosing the right ISP is not easy. Begin your search with careful research and investigation.

Speciality computer papers, computer magazines, and daily newspapers tend to carry an assortment of ISP advertisements, so these are all good places to start your research. If you already have access to the Web, use it to search for a suitable ISP on the Internet itself. Virtually every ISP has its own website with information on the access plans available. There are several helpful websites dedicated to finding the right ISP, which allow you to look for an ISP in your region and price range, and provide information on access plans, connectivity details and include user opinions on service quality. Perhaps the most reliable way to find an ISP you can trust is through word of mouth. Ask business associates, colleagues, and friends for recommendations on ISPs they currently use and whose services they enjoy and trust.

Most ISPs offer the same basic service—access to the Internet, and all use the same type of high-speed Internet connection. The differences between ISPs lie in the price, features, and quality of customer service they offer and the first thing to realize is that your business requires more than just Internet access. An ISP who intends to go a step further than others will enhance basic connectivity with additional features such as on-site installation and set up, domain-name hosting (for Websites and email), security for dedicated access lines, virus email protection, file back up and storage, extended technical support hours, and automated billing. These

features are all designed to provide a complete, one-stop Internet access solution for customers, and are important features to inquire about before you sign up. A complete Internet access package may cost more than simple connectivity, but is often cheaper than buying individual services from different suppliers and will save you countless hours of worry managing different technical vendor relationships.

Once you decide on the feature set you are looking for, your choice as a small business lies between choosing a smaller, local ISP or a large regional or national ISP. Each has its strengths and weaknesses and there are specific advantages in choosing a local ISP. Local ISPs tend to cater specifically to the community they reside in and, because they are smaller, offer better services and more attractive prices.

Larger Internet Service Providers typically have higher overheads and these costs are usually passed on to their customers. Unfortunately, in these difficult economic times many large providers have had difficulty staying afloat and have gone out of business. Smaller Internet providers, on the other hand, have kept their costs down and continue to thrive and grow. Smaller providers tend to focus on offering extended features, more personalized service, and can react and deal with your personal requirements more quickly. You also get quicker attention from senior management if you have problems, as smaller ISPs are keenly aware of the importance of retaining every customer's loyalty.

There are benefits to choosing a large, national ISP—most important being brand name. National ISPs offer a familiar name that their subscribers can recognize and trust. National or international coverage may also be a valuable feature if you are a frequent traveller or have multiple branches. While smaller providers are often unable to invest in the marketing expense required to create a recognized brand name or establish multiple locations, over the long term, they have acquired a very devoted group of local customers who ap-

preciate the better prices and the consistently high level of personal service they receive.

When you've narrowed down your choices, it is important to obtain first-hand opinions and information by talking to current users. Call the ISP and ask questions: what additional features, such as security, are bundled in with the basic service? How often has the service gone down in the past three to six months and for how long? 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?

How much should you pay for service? In general, one always gets what one pays for. If the price seems too good to be true, then it probably is. Many businesses try to save by purchasing a bundled voice-Internet service offering from a phone company (internet access, local, and long distance phone package in one). This appears to be convenient because you receive a single bill each month for all services. There are downsides, however: often the Internet service offered is bare bones access, designed to draw you in at a very low price point. Essential additional services such as security for your connection, or email virus protection, are not available and you will usually find that to create a complete Internet service package becomes much more expensive. A combined voice-Internet package also makes it difficult for you to switch to another provider if you are not happy with one of the services provided.

Once you've chosen your ISP, you have a choice of Internet connections: dial-up or "dedicated" access. A dial-up connection requires you to use a modem and regular telephone line to dial in and connect to your ISP. This is ideal for small businesses where people can live with one person connecting to the Internet at a time. Although access speed is slower, generally 56Kb/s, the connection serves its purpose if you only need to access email and Websites on an intermittent basis. It is

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also inexpensive—anywhere from \$9.95 to \$29.95 a month.

If your business is more than a very small organization, with more than ten employees, and if staff make extensive use of the Internet for email 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 costs between two and four hundred dollars a month, but is fast and reliable and

can be shared among up to fifty employees. The cost per user connected to the Internet therefore drops significantly. Dedicated connections allow you to run your own Internet services such as your own mail, Web, and FTP servers at your own company premises.

When you connect your internal computer network directly to the Internet through a full-time, dedicated connection, it is vital that your company becomes aware of security issues. This means that you must invest in a network firewall—a device that will keep outside Internet users from entering and misusing your internal computer network. A quality network firewall can cost between three hundred and two thousand dollars for a mid-sized com-

pany, but this money is very wisely spent. Ask your ISP if they offer network security services—either bundled with access or separately—and what these will cost to install and maintain. The cost of an intruder entering and damaging your network is incalculable.

**C**h o o s e your ISP carefully. Your connection to the world outside depends on it. **SBCM**

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