

The ABCs of finding the right ISP

Consider cost, security options, technician service

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As founder of Pathway Communications, one of Toronto's first Internet service providers, Ashok Kalle has heard it all.

First, it was the often-heard question of which ISP is best for home use. Then, as small businesses found that they couldn't do without an Internet connection, the question was which ISP can best serve their specialized needs.

"With hundreds of ISPs seeking your account with a wide range of offerings, choosing the right ISP is not easy," he says.

Specialty 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, he says. Kalle also suggests searching the Internet itself (<http://www.canadianisp.com>) if you already have an ISP. Then there's the decision of going for a regional or national ISP or a smaller local one.

"National or international coverage may be a valuable feature if you are a frequent traveller or have multiple branches," he says. "Local ISPs tend to cater specifically to the community they reside in and, because they are smaller, might offer better services and more attractive prices" because of lower overhead, he says.

It's important to obtain information by talking to current users, Kalle adds. Then call the ISP and ask specific 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?"

Most ISPs offer the same basic service such as access to the Internet, and all use the same type of high-speed Internet connection, he says. Rogers offers a connection for \$79.95 a month and then various plans that include more e-mail addresses and data transfer and storage space.



DO YOUR HOMEWORK: Ashok Kalle, founder of Pathway Communications, one of Toronto's first Internet service providers, advises talking to a prospective ISP's current users, then calling the company to ask questions.

Bell Sympatico's high speed (DSL) can begin as low as \$24.95 with myriad other packages.

"An ISP who intends to go a step further will enhance basic connectivity with additional features such as on-site installation and set up, domain name hosting (for Web sites and e-mail), security, virus e-mail virus protection, file backup and storage, extended technical support hours and automated billing," he says. "A complete Internet access package may cost more than simple connectivity, but is often cheaper than buying individual services from different suppliers.

"Typically you can get just bare-bones access for something close to \$60 a month. But then you're on your own. You have to install the service yourself. You have to make sure your local area network is connected to the Internet. Make sure you have adequate security. You have to go out and find a place that will host your Web site. You have to get adequate e-mail addresses."

Kalle says his firm signed up 500 small business customers last year.

"We don't charge them \$59. We charge them \$199. But we provide a full-service package."

Niraj Lal, president of Markham-based Dawn Canadian Labels Inc., a litho print company that specializes in labels, says he's been with Pathway (<http://www.pathcom.com>) as long as it's had this plan and likes it because the techie stuff is Pathway's problem, not his.

"The security part is attractive because it protects us from the viruses, hackers and intruders," he says.

"They do the Web hosting and keep these viruses and hackers away and as an ISP provider, I don't think I could ask any more out of them than I'm getting."

For a small business that needs more than just an ISP, a company such as ThinData (<http://www.thindata.com>) will not only develop a Web page but also show how to manage it effectively. A client will be able to log in and update a Web site as she pleases.

"The most important thing is how businesses use the e-mails that they gathered through their Web site," says ThinData CEO Chris Carder.

Through its e-mail marketing system, a client can communicate with all its clients or a targeted group.

Carder, who has helped manage sites ranging from Jesse's Centre for Teenagers and Detroit Red Wings goaltender Curtis Joseph to Environics Communications, says the average small business spends between \$100 and \$500 a month, depending on what services and tools they are using.

"What our clients find is that when they analyze their bills when they were paying a company to do content changes, as opposed to doing it on their own, is that their bills decrease," he says. "They aren't paying hourly rates to get it done."