Tips for Selecting a Business ISP

Two common mistakes made by businesses when selecting an Internet Service Provider (ISP) are not planning for their future communication needs and not shopping around to get the best service and price. As a result, they sometimes choose the wrong provider. Other mistakes include not reading the Service Level Agreement thoroughly and understanding the terms, or locking themselves into a long-term contract only to find that better rates or service is available from another provider. Although some ISPs may offer discounts for long-term contracts, it is better to commit to no more than two years since technology, services, and prices are constantly changing and it's difficult to project your needs further ahead.

Regardless of whether you are arranging a new connection or looking to upgrade existing service, it's important to consider what your technology needs will be for the next two to three years. It is important to understand your company's current and future needs and requirements in terms of bandwidth, speed and reliability.

Consider what changes are likely to occur that will impact your need for greater bandwidth or speed. Will you be hiring more employees, opening a branch office, launching a website, or adding an e-commerce feature? Are you considering switching to Internet voice telephone service (VoIP)? Internet voice service can provide substantial cost savings over a traditional telephone system, but will require additional bandwidth. These are just some of the possibilities to consider.

Many companies are now taking advantage of "cloud-based" software applications and data storage; meaning that the computer servers are located remotely, rather than in-house. While there are advantages to using offsite servers, keep in mind that this may require more Internet bandwidth.

Extensive use of graphic, image or video files in your communications means larger data files; therefore, more bandwidth and faster upload and download speeds would be desirable. Is your need for speed, reliability and security such that you need a dedicated line?

So, how much bandwidth do you need? There are tools available that can help you monitor your current network traffic. Get advice from an expert if you don't understand what you are doing. Consult your IT department manager if you have one. If not, consider hiring a consultant to develop a plan for you. You can also talk to representatives of the Internet Service Providers in your area, but keep in mind that their job is to sell you service. It is better to have an independent and unbiased analysis of your needs if possible. You should select a service plan based on your peak-demand bandwidth needs, not the average.

Once you have determined the amount of bandwidth, transmission speed and services you need, research the various companies that can provide an Internet connection to your location. Ask other businesses in your area for recommendations; especially those whose data communication needs are similar to yours. Providers that primarily offer residential service may not have true business-class connections which typically offer more bandwidth, faster upload and download speeds, better reliability and security.

Depending on your location, your choices are often between DSL (Digital Subscriber Line) from your local telephone company, or a cable Internet connection offered by television service providers. In large urban areas you may also have the option of wireless metro Ethernet.

DSL high-speed Internet connections use a standard telephone line. In most cases the same line is used for both telephone calls and Internet simultaneously. DSL requires use of a modem to code and decode data transmissions. The modem is usually included in the service fee. With DSL, speed is primarily related to your distance from the telephone company's nearest routing station.

High-speed Cable Internet service uses the same fiber optic cables that provide television service. A modem is also needed for data transmission and typically is included in the service package; however, an equipment rental fee may apply. With cable, data transmission speed is dependent on how many users are on your neighborhood system and how many users are online at once.

Wireless Ethernet networks use antennas to send and receive data through the air, without any wires or cables. This technology has greatly improved in recent years and business-grade wireless services are now incredibly fast and reliable when using a metropolitan Ethernet network.

Once you have identified who can provide service in your location, it all comes down to a comparison of price, speed, bandwidth, reliability and features. Ask a lot of questions.

Look for a provider whose service is scalable and can grow with your business without your having to start from scratch or renegotiate the contract when your needs change. That way you buy only what you need today, knowing that the service can easily be expanded.

Does the provider allocate bandwidth dynamically? For example, if your connection serves both data and voice, if data transmission is higher than normal but voice traffic is low, can it flex to utilize the bandwidth allocated for voice?

How much are the installation costs? Can these costs be spread over time, or is it all required up front?

Is software needed for the connection? Is so, is it included or is there an additional fee?

What equipment is included with the service agreement, or do you have to purchase/lease it? Who is responsible for software updates or hardware maintenance?

Consider your need for backup, or redundancy, in your data and voice connections. If you lose power, your VoIP phones may not work, so at least one telephone "land-line" may be needed for emergencies. How critical is your data and Internet connection? Do you need a backup Internet connection?

How many email accounts do you need? Plan to have some extras available to quickly accommodate changes in personnel or to add general email addresses, such as "info@yourcompanyname.com."

Ask about the security features offered by those providers you are considering. You should use your own internal hardware firewalls, as well as software security features in addition to your provider's security measures. Systems that are always turned on and connected to the Internet are at higher risk. Software protection must be updated regularly to counter invasions from newly developed viruses and other hacker tools such as spyware.

Know what service and support your provider offers. Is the provider's service sub-contracted? Is the support help desk located in another country? Are there any fees assessed for providing support? Check out the company with the Better Business Bureau and look online for any independent customer reviews. If there are any problems with service, those will typically surface if you dig a little bit.

Service Level Agreements (SLA) spell out exactly what services you are to receive, and often include guarantees as to reliability. Before signing any agreements, read the SLA and get a knowledgeable person to interpret technical information if you don't understand it. Know what you are agreeing to, and what the provider is liable for.

To summarize:

- Do your homework first. Know your needs before you go shopping.
- Compare the prices, service options and features of those companies that can provide an Internet connection to your location. It's unlikely that any service will be perfect, so weigh the pros and cons of each before deciding.
- Read all the fine print in your Service Level Agreement. Know what you are committing to, as well as the provider's responsibilities. Look for any "red flags" relating to their support and customer service before you sign.
- When the service is installed and communications are running smoothly, pat yourself on the back for a job well done. Then, plan to review your Internet needs again within a year. In this world of constantly changing technology, it's smart to pay attention to one of the most essential tools used in business today.