THIS & THAT

by
Bob Lunaburg

Have you been asking things like, *What's all this I hear about faster Internet services? How does this stuff work? How much does it cost? Is it for me?*, you will want to read this article. For the rest of you I have only one question. Why aren't you interested in this stuff? Who said, "Give me a break!"

The Internet has opened for us a whole new world of computer use. It allows us to Email (Electronic mail) other Internet users, and surf the 'net for information, shopping, gaming, chatting, and many other fun things. In short, it is arguably the fastest growing reason for using the computer these days. Everyone is doing it.

But, one of the biggest hang-ups we have when using the 'net is the speed at which we can send and receive stuff. Sometimes it takes forever just to receive and read one little Email. At other times they come to us in lickity split order. In time we become impatient whenever things slow down and ask if there are ways all this could be speeded up...and there are. Of course the faster your Internet connection, the more money you will pay, but what the heck, you have *deep pockets* don't you? Who said, "Give me a break!"

The three basic connection types are, in order of speed: 1. Dial-up, 2. DSL, 3. Cable Modem.

Let's take them one at a time.

DIAL-UP

This is the least expensive and most popular way of connecting to the 'net. The idea here is that you subscribe (pay a monthly charge) for service using a local (Atlanta area) service provider like AOL, Earthlink, NetZero, Juno, MSN, BellSouth, ATT, and the like. This service requires you to have a MODEM in your computer (most computers these days come with a MODEM), and requires you to connect your computer to a telephone jack in the wall. After you install your service's programs, you can use your computer to call your local provider's phone number and connect with one of their computers...and thereby connect through that service to the 'net. You want a local service provider so that you don't have to pay toll or long distance charges while connected to your service.

This method of connecting requires you to dial your local provider each time you want to use the 'net, and then hang up when you are done. In this manner your computer is only hooked to the 'net while you use it. At all other times your computer is isolated from the 'net...because you have hung up, or broken your connection when you are not using it.

This method has two downsides: 1. Your phone is busy while you are dialed up, so you can't make or receive phone calls at that time. But that is really nothing different than when you call someone with your phone. While you talk to that person, you can't call someone else or receive a call (unless you have call waiting; which you must disable while you are using the 'net). 2. The second downside is

that it may end up operating at very slow speeds. The maximum speed this service will work at, and it's mostly a theoretical maximum, is 56,000 characters per second (The techies say 56 KBS which means the same as 56,000 characters per second, but they say K for thousand, B for Bytes (characters), and S for per second. You will be very lucky if your connection ever gets as fast as 50 KBS. It's common to work at 28 KBS. This reduction in speed is due to many things, but one big factor is the electronic quality of the telephone line between your computer and the telephone company's local central office.

The remaining two methods for connecting to the 'net are faster than Dial-up, and electronically connect you to the 'net any time your computer is turned on. If you have cable TV you know what that is like. Your TV cable is always available for you to use. All you have to do is turn the TV on and you have programming. DSL and Cable Modem service are like that when it comes to the Internet. If you have either, you have access whenever you turn your computer on.

DSL (Digital Subscriber Line)

DSL uses special telephone lines which must be installed in your area before they can be used for DSL, AND your house cannot be more than approximately three and a third miles from your local telephone company's central office. When your telephone meets those two restrictions, you can subscribe to any service that is available through your phone company's equipment.

DSL is often advertised as being 50 times faster than Dial-up. Again, this is a maximum which is rarely achieved, but 30 times faster happens, and that's a very noticeable increase in speed. Also, you can use your telephone while you surf the 'net. This is like having a second phone line when you have dial-up and you are on the 'net.

DSL costs more per month than Dial-up. You pay the standard Dial-up fee (say $20) plus an additional fee (often about $30) for DSL.

You will also have to buy or rent a DSL modem which means you won't be using the modem inside your computer. Some services include this cost in the basic monthly service, the others add it to it.

The downside is that your computer is available to the 'net whenever it is turned on making it absolutely necessary that you install and regularly update Anti-Virus and Firewall programs on your computer to protect it from computer hackers and the like. These people really exist and they really can screw up your computer's software if you are not protected.

CABLE-MODEM

This is like DSL in that it requires special wires in your neighborhood before you can subscribe. If you have cable TV in your area, you can get Cable internet service. Cable service uses your cable company's equipment, not the telephone company's equipment.

When you add Internet service to your cable TV service, they put a cable splitter on your line which sends Internet access to your computer and TV signals to your TV. You also need a Cable Modem for your computer. Again, this is an added cost (not much more than DSL's added cost on top of your service provider's basic dial-up fee) which is billed monthly like it is with DSL.

The advantage of Cable Internet service is that it is twice as fast as DSL. Cable service

has been advertised at one hundred times faster than Dial-up. This maximum is theoretical. Your actual service will be slower, but is noticeably faster than DSL. Here again, you have the advantage that you can use your phone while on-line with the Internet. Here again too, the disadvantage is that you will have to protect your computer's software from hackers by installing Anti-Virus and Firewall programs, and by keeping them regularly (at least monthly) updated.

One final word here, whenever you use the Internet you must have an Anti-Virus program on your computer, and you must keep it updated at least monthly. If you don't, you are open to computer viruses which are a very nasty bother. Once infected, at the least, your computer will work slower and slower, and at the very worst you will have to have all the software on hard drive reinstalled and you will lose all you personal data too.

If you use your Dial-up connection quite a bit (several hours a day) you should buy, install, and regularly update a Firewall program too.

I hope this helps you understand a bit more about the different kinds of internet connections offered. I plan to say more on this topic in the future some time. In the meanwhile HAPPY SURFIN'.