



1996 Waste Information Expo:

# Exploring The Internet

## Choosing an Internet Service Provider

An Internet Service Provider (ISP) is your connection to the Internet. Choice of ISP is important both for those looking for Internet access and those looking for a host for a web site. Before signing a contract (or surrendering your credit card number) seek the answers to these questions:

**• How does the ISP charge for access?**

Most individuals and small businesses want to connect to the Internet via their telephones. Their modem dials a number, goes through some hoops, and then they are connected. Some ISPs charge a flat rate for this service; that is, unlimited time online. Others charge a flat rate for x-hours, then per-hour afterwards. A few charge by the hour, period.

There are other things to consider besides price (aren't there always?). What kinds of services are provided with the account? Is there unlimited e-mail and access to newsgroups? If your needs change, does the ISP offer ISDN service (a faster connection)? Does the ISP provide a shell account (useful if you want to visit sites with a non-graphical browser).

**• How is the ISP connected to the Net?**

Large, global networks carry Internet traffic. ISPs connect to this backbone with different sized "pipes" (connections). Think of a six-lane divided highway versus a single-lane dirt road. More cars can move faster on the six-lane highway, all other things being equal.

At a minimum, your ISP should have a T-1 connection. If you are looking for someone to host a site, then make sure there are at least two T-1 lines (back-up).

Also, what is the policy on number of users per modem? That is, what are the odds that when you try to log onto the Net, you will get a connection and not a busy signal? A one-to-one ratio would be ideal, but not cost-effective for the provider!

**• Does the ISP provide virtual domain hosting?**

Each computer on the Net has an address. However, an ISP can take one computer with a very large hard drive and give it multiple addresses. Think of Mailboxes Etc. or other for-profit postal outlets. You rent a mailbox; in return, they provide you with a street address and a suite number. You have created a virtual office.

Some ISPs create virtual domain names. That is, after you register your name with Internet administration (InterNIC), people can reach you by merely typing the name, for example, <http://www.enetdigest.com>. Your site is on a computer with lots of other sites, but it has a unique address. There is snob appeal associated with having a "real" domain name.

Can the provider give you a virtual domain? And at what cost? Remember, there is no requirement that your host be in your hometown. My newsletter resides on a site in Pittsburg for \$30 a month, with unlimited e-mail and no charges for "hits."

Which leads to another question: does the ISP charge for the quantity of material transferred from your site through the net or by the number of site visitors (hits)? Beware of these restrictions if you expect to have a popular site.

The market is new, so let the buyer beware reigns. And realize that the adage "you get what you pay for" may not always hold true. Research before you sign.



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