

Web Surfing: ISP Tips

By Richard Lowe

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Perhaps one of the most important things to consider when determining how to get on the internet is choosing your ISP (Internet Service Provider). This is the company that connects you to the internet via the phone line, DSL, modem, T1 or whatever else you want to use. Generally they provide the following:

- A way to get to the internet. This can be a simple dial-up modem, a DSL line, a cable modem or even a satellite link.
- A software package (generally a customized browser such as Netscape or Internet explorer)
- A logon (username and password)
- An access phone number for dialup or ISDN connections.
- Free web space (AOL, for example, gives you 2mb per screen name).
- Access to a newsgroup server.
- One or more email accounts.

Nothing else will enhance or undermine your surfing experience as quickly or as totally as your choice of ISP. A good ISP is a joy to work with because basically after installation you never even worry about them. The phone lines are virtually never busy, the connection is robust, their technical

services are always available and cheerful. In other words, a good ISP is like the proverbial Maytag repairman (remember those commercials) - you never need to worry about them because they always work well.

A bad ISP, on the other hand, makes your surfing experience miserable. Very little is as frustrating as when you need to access the web and you get constant busy signals. Lines that hang up mysteriously or newsgroup servers that don't work. Email that's lost or very late, and technical services people that never seem to be available or return phone calls.

It's usually wise to take your time when choosing an ISP, because most of them require a multi-month contract. I would offer the following advice:

- Try and get a month-to-month contract if you can so you can cancel (at least at first, until you know how good they are).
- Do your research and don't be swayed by fancy ads and television commercials.
- If you can, check out their newsgroup (many ISPs have their own technical support newsgroups), message boards and chat rooms.
- Ask your friends and associates if they have any experience with them
- Before you make the decision get their technical support number and make a call. Pretend like you are a naive user and ask a few questions. See how long you wait on hold and how helpful the people are.
- Check out a history of the value of their stocks. Companies that are having trouble tend to have stock values which have declined in recent months.
- Make sure you get a flat rate for connection time. It's a good idea to never, ever get a per-hour charge as these can add up fast.
Make sure the ISP has a local phone number. Long distance charges will also add up very quickly.
- Even if you can still find a free ISP, I would highly recommend against them. There is always a hidden cost to these places, and lately they have tended to be very unstable.
- Personally, I try not to mix apples and oranges. A good ISP does not necessarily make a good web host.

Once you've chosen an ISP and are set up, don't put up with anything. You wouldn't wait very long if your phone stopped working to get it fixed, would you? So don't wait to let someone know if your service is poor and be prepared to escalate it all the way up the corporate ladder if you need to. These guys are taking your money and providing a service, and you deserve good service.

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Richard Lowe Jr. is the webmaster of Internet Tips And Secrets. This website includes over 1,000 free articles to improve your internet profits, enjoyment and knowledge.

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