



Everything You've Always Wanted to Know about ISPs But Were Afraid to Ask!

Kimberly McCoy

What is an ISP?

If you have a computer at home or are thinking about purchasing one, you have probably heard the abbreviation "ISP." ISP stands for Internet Service Providers. An ISP is one way to access the Internet from home or work. Choosing the right ISP can be as nerve-racking as selecting the right long distance company for your needs. Unfortunately, if you are not knowledgeable about the various services and plans you could be throwing money out of the window. There are several items you should consider when selecting an ISP. Some of these items include what kind of service is available, price plans, and technical support, just to name a few.

Type of ISPs

Free ISPs - That's right, there are several companies that offer free (yes, free!) access to the Internet. In order to use any of the free ISPs you have to download and install the provider's software to your computer. Unfortunately, some of the free ISPs don't have local access numbers for certain areas. Currently, most of the companies required that you have Microsoft Internet Explorer 5.0 or higher and are using either Windows 95, 98 or 2000. One major disadvantage is most of the free ISP's have banners and advertisements that you are not able to close or remove while you are on-line.

Before you run home and download the software, please visit the following two sites. Free ISP review at www.isp.f2s.com has a complete list of all the free ISPs, contact information for each, tech support hours and methods (email, toll free 800, etc.), whether the ISP has banners and advertisements, modem speed needed, software supported, amount of web space provided, and reviews from users. Free ISP Internet Access Network located at www.free-isp-internet-access.net/isp.html reviews and rates some of the Free ISPs as well as free web based email programs. This site also has a FAQ page.

Filtered ISP - If you are concerned about your children

visiting certain sites via the Internet, you can choose to sign up with a Filtered ISP. Filtered ISPs can prevent and/or block access to certain material on the Internet that's not appropriate for children. Periodically, updates will be needed from the provider, to ensure that the software is blocking the most recent information on the Web. One major disadvantage is that if an adult wants to go to a particular site, the Filtered ISP may consider it inappropriate and block the web site. Some filtering ISPs include: Mayberry USA at www.mayberryusa.net, Safe Access located at safeaccess.net, Clean Web available at www.cleanweb.net, and Internet 4 Families at i4f.com.

Local ISP - Local ISPs are usually small companies that provide Internet access to individuals in a particular area or region. Local ISPs are usually less expensive than national ISPs. However, when traveling you might not be able to access the local ISP from any location. If you need a local ISP for your area visit the following sites and type in your area code.

The List

www.thelist.com/

Sure ISP

www.isps.co

Computer User

www.computeruser.com/resources/isp

CNET

www.cnet.com

- Locate Internet tools
- Click on the Find an ISP link

National ISP - National providers allow you to access the Internet from nearly any location. Usually national providers' cost more than local providers. However, if you are a frequent traveler and you need to access the Internet while you are on the road, you might want to go with a national provider. Some national ISPs are:



America Online
www.aol.co
AT&T WorldNet
www.worldnet.att.net
Prodigy
www.prodigy.com
Gateway
www.gateway.net

Email

If Email is the only reason you are going online, then you really shouldn't be spending a lot of money on an ISP. There are loads of free (yes, free) Web based Email providers. Even if you don't have a computer at home you can still access these Web based Email services from a library, work, community center, friend's house, or anywhere there is Internet access. One disadvantage to using some of the free Web based Email is that they lack some important features. To illustrate, some don't have spell check or spam filters. Another disadvantage is that they tend to have a lot of advertisements. See the additional resources section for places that offer free Web based Email.

Things to Consider

Local access numbers

Before you sign-up with an ISP you should determine whether or not there is a local number for your area. If you select an ISP that doesn't have a local phone number for your area, you might end up paying the telephone company additional money just to get online. Individuals who live in or near a major city shouldn't have to worry about this. However, if you live near or in a more rural area then you might have to pay a little more to access the Internet. In the event you can't locate an ISP with local access numbers, some ISPs provide consumers with an 800 number, but the calls are not free. For a comprehensive listing of 800 number services, visit www.isps.com.

Usage

Usage refers to the amount of time you plan to use the Internet. Some questions you need to ask yourself are: how often you go online? What you are doing while you are online? Are you only reading and sending email? Doing some occasional chatting or surfing? Creating and uploading Web pages? A frequent user spends 10-15 hours a week online. If you don't consider yourself a frequent user, but you do consider yourself a casual one, you shouldn't be paying \$20 or more a month to use it for 3-5 hours. Plenty of ISPs provide various price plan options. If you are a casual user and decide to go with a price plan option; it could save you money in the long run.

Price Plans

Most of the major ISPs will have both unlimited and limited price plans. Currently, the standard for unlimited plans is \$19.95 for unlimited access. If you are, or think you will be a frequent user (10-15 hours a week) then the unlimited price plan is the best option. Some ISPs provide discounts for signing up for longer terms such as 12 months or 2 years. In addition to providing discounts for signing up longer, some companies also offer discounts if you decide to do automatic payments by credit or debit cards. Limited price plans will vary depending on the company. Usually limited price plans charge anywhere from \$5 to \$10 a month for a set number of usage hours (5, 10, 20 hours per month). Some companies also charge \$2 or more for each additional hour over the plan. The limited price plans are ideal for the casual user who will only access the Internet a few times a week or month.

Test ISP

The ISP you are considering should have a Web site. The Web site should provide a list of numbers that would allow you to test them. In order to test the ISP's access numbers call the provider during high peak hours. If the numbers are always busy when you call, more than likely there will be a busy signal when you try and access them from your computer. (*High peak times usually are after 3:00 p.m. on weekdays, 6:00 p.m. on weekdays, and late Sunday evenings*).

Tech Support

See if the ISP you are considering has a Frequently Asked Questions page (FAQ). Most ISPs should have a Web page that has a FAQ page to assist the user. Try to go with a company that has a toll-free 800 number for technical support and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Unfortunately, many companies don't provide a toll-free 800 number, but there are some still available. You don't want to go with a company that only offers tech support via Email. For example, how are you to get in touch with them when you can't get online?

Web Space and Tools

If you think you might want to put a personal Web page online now or some time in the near future, you need to find out how much space the ISP is offering. Most ISPs offer 5 to 10 MB for their customers, which should be plenty of space. In addition to offering you a specific amount of space, your ISP should also provide you with some type of publishing tool, a web editor, or links to shareware that can assist you with publishing the web site. (*Shareware: inexpensive software via the Web*)

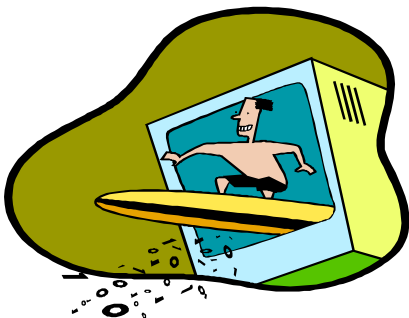


Modem Support

The most important item you want to consider before selecting an ISP is the modem speed. Some common modem speeds involve 28.8 kbps, 33.6 kbps, and 56 kbps. Not all ISPs support all modem speeds. You want to make sure that you are utilizing your modem to its fullest potential. To illustrate, if your modem speed is 56 kbps and the ISP only supports 28.8 kbps then you are not getting the best connection possible. In order to determine the speed of your modem please refer to documentation that came with your computer.

Reliability

There are several ways to determine if an ISP is reliable before signing up with one. Ask friends, co-workers, or family members; review web sites that provide users' comments about their experiences and sites that rate ISPs. Visual Network located at www.visualnetworks.com rates the performance of national ISPs monthly. This service is provided to evaluate how reliable the site is from the consumer's perspective. Some of the categories included on the rating scale are log-in-time, call failure rate, and Web page download rate, and Web failures/time-out rates. To review the latest ratings visit the site at www.visualnetworks.com and click on the link titled "Latest ISP ratings" located on the left-hand side of the home page.



Additional Information and Resources on ISP

- CMPNET The Technology Network reviews and rates many ISPs. You can also search by area code, price, and national ISPs at www.ISPs.com
- ISP.COM available at www.isp.com is a comprehensive site that contains directories and reviews all dealing with various ISPs. You can also compare national ISPs by price and quality.
- CNET allows you to rate your ISP by completing the online questionnaire located at www.cnet.com. Locate Internet tools and click "Find an ISP" link.

- ZDNET located at www.zdnet.com/reviews/ contains information about services and reliability. Scroll down to Internet and network, select the ISPs link and select one of the ISP highlights located on the left-hand side.
- Computer USER at www.computeruser.com/resources/isp/ allows you to obtain a quote from an ISP or print out the checklist of questions one should ask when searching for an ISP. The site also allows you to search by company name and area code.
- ABOUT.COM Familyinternet.about.com. Once you get to the site, type ISP in the search box to locate the many resources on this site.

Free ISPs

- Address.com
www.address.com/
- Free Internet access/Free Web access
www.talkingdirectory.com/freewebcanada.com/
- Spinway.com Free Internet Access
www.spinway.com/
- 1stUp.com
www.1stup.com/
- Netzero
www.netzero.com
- Freeintet
www.freei.net
- Alta Vista Free Access
www.zdnet.com/downloads/altavista/
- Juno
www.juno.com

Free Web-based Email

- 1 on 1 Mail
www.1on1mail.com
- Yahoo
www.yahoo.co
- Netscape
www.netscape.com
- My Own Email
www.myownemail.com
- MailCit
www.lycos.co
- Hotmail
www.hotmail.com
- HushMail
www.hushmail.com
- Email Choice
www.emailchoice.com