Using an ISP requires no new technology – all you need is a computer, a modem, a telephone line (preferably broadband), and the appropriate software (which is available free of charge when you sign up with the service).

Most of the services are very similar, but it is still worth looking around for a service that offers at least the following features:

High speed

Connection can be provided by standard dial-up using an ordinary modem or by using a broadband connection. Standard dial-up is the slowest at 56 Kbps. Broadband such as ADSL (Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line) provides different speeds for uploading (sending data) and downloading (receiving data) ranging from 256 Kbps to 2 Mbps.

High Usage Allowance

The amount of data that you are allowed to upload or download in a given time period may be limited. Sending email, browsing the Web or downloading images does not require high usage allowances, downloading MP3 music files requires more. Online gaming and viewing video online will require a high usage allowance. Usage allowance is normally quoted as GB per month.

Good Value Packages

Various packages are available offering different options that can be paid monthly, annually, biannually etc. With these packages, after paying the initial fee, Internet access is usually unmetered. You can also opt for pay-as-you-go packages. Look for a package where the initial rate is reduced. You have to compare ISP offers carefully to find a package that provides what you want at the cheapest cost.

CD-ROM or Online sign up

Some ISPs require you to sign up for their service online (which obviously means you already need to have an Internet connection and some experience with setting up a dial-up networking connection). If you are a complete beginner, you’ll need an ISP which can provided its sigh-up software on CD-ROM that will automatically configure your computer to access the Internet.

Local rate calls

Nearly all ISPs provide local call access numbers. Any ISP that uses a national rate number or charges an initial set up or administration fee should be avoided.

Email

Having several email accounts is very useful – you can separate business and personal email for example, or provide an address for each member of your family. Many ISPs also offer only Web-based mail which is great if you need to get into your computer on the move as you can access it from any computer with Internet access. POP3 email, however, is faster and more efficient and can be downloaded to your PC to read offline – a combination of the two is ideal.

Junk mail filtering and virus checking

Spam (unsolicited email) is very common. It fills up your storage space and is time consuming to deal with. It is also one of the main sources of viruses that attack your computer. Look for an ISP that provides good filtering services to remove junk mail and viruses before they reach your computer.

Free Web space

A decent amount of free Web space would be around 25-50Mb. This would be sufficient for most of your own personal website developments. Also check to see if there are any restrictions on your use of web space, since some ISPs will not let you user the space for commercial purposes.

Customer Support

The accessibility and quality of customer support provided by ISPs varies and some ISPs make an additional charge for support.

Reliable Service

Of course all the features in the world won’t make a scrap of difference if the ISP is unreliable and you find it impossible to log on. Look out for recommendations from friends and shop around.