

SO MUCH CHOICE, SO LITTLE TO GO ON. **HOW DO YOU CHOOSE THE BEST ISP** TO SUIT YOUR NEEDS? JOHN LEYDON OFFERS SOME PRACTICAL ADVICE.

Service industry

They get you to sign up when you're at college or starting work. Often they offer a plethora of free gifts and inducements. Through inertia, or being tied-in to an ever-tighter business relationship, users are disinclined to change accounts. They hope that many will ultimately use their service to set up a small business.

"They" are not banks but Internet Service Providers (ISPs). With financial institutions such as the Nationwide setting themselves up as service providers on the information superhighway, you might be forgiven for not understanding the difference.

Like banks, ISPs offer an array of accounts, and tracking their performance can be a real problem, particularly when the organisations running services to access the internet are almost as diverse as the organisations on the net itself. Groups as manifold as Tesco, Amnesty International and Burnley Football Club (who alone can anticipate loyalty) produced online service products last year.

The market is changing dramatically. In the wake of Demon's acquisition by Scottish Telecom, Dixons upped the ante further by launching Freeserve in September, the most prominent example of the free ISP phenomenon. And in the midst of all this change, small businesses and consumers are faced with the dilemma of which ISP to choose for their internet service. The difficulty in making a choice is compounded by the fact that frustrating experiences of using the internet, or World Wide Wait as some describe it, may not be caused by an ISP at all. Online problems can equally be down

to a lack of memory on your PC, modem speed, response times of remote web sites, power outages, or the general state of the internet as a "best-efforts method of transferring data". However, the particular ISP you choose is a key factor and will, to a considerable extent, safeguard against accidents occurring on the information superhighway.

The difficulty for users is that there is no easy way to make your choice. Getting information that shows the differences between ISPs is a struggle simply because of the diverse options available. For a small-business user the situation is made worse by the highly aggressive sales techniques, the "double-glazing sales approach", used by some ISPs in promoting their services.

An example of such is British Telecom's promotion of its new pay-as-you-go internet service, called Click. Telesales staff used customer-calling information to identify internet users and these people were then offered the new BT service — in flagrant violation of fair competition rules. BT admitted the practice had taken place. It placed the blame on its telesales advisors and said it would not happen again. Should the practice be repeated, the Office of Telecommunications (OfTel) has warned BT that an order might be placed against it. This is just one manifestation of the fiercely competitive nature of the ISP market.

In September, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) upheld a complaint against CompuServe over a national press advertisement which had made an offer at which even the worst insomniac would balk. CompuServe had launched an advertisement headlined "Want to get on the internet? Try this for starters". It claimed "FREE One month's trial. FREE 650

hours online". Six complainants objected that the advertisement was misleading because users would have to spend 27 days and two hours online in a month to take full advantage of the offer. The ASA asked CompuServe to take copy advice in future.

Faced with such a barrage of information, yet little that is definitive, it is wise to apply first principles to choosing an ISP. Getting the right connection is about matching what *you* need with the services of a provider. Consider what you want from an internet connection and what might irritate you, such as banner ads.

Contrary to popular opinion, variously sized ISPs do offer different features and levels of support. Don't get sucked in by the hype and confused by the different offerings. There is differentiation. It's not a case of one size fits all.

"If you're going to use an ISP for your business, consider a provider that specialises in the business sector in which you operate," says Keith Mitchell, executive chairman of LINX (London Internet Exchange), a non-profit partnership involving about 58 ISPs. "If you just want value for money and lots of help get [an ISP] which offers a more general service."

Support for web-building tools like Microsoft Front Page, and for domain registration, is a key point to consider. Other important factors to contemplate include the size of web space the ISP provides, and how many mailboxes it gives you and whether these can be customised. Does it offer roaming service support, which allows

access from other countries? Are there services to block unsolicited bulk emails (spam)? And, last but not least, are tools available to protect children against unsuitable content?

Cliff Stanford, former managing director of Demon Internet, says the key reason to choose an

The common-sense approach to choosing an ISP is to **GET IT RIGHT FIRST TIME**, rather than after having had an unsatisfactory experience

ISP remains the quality of service it provides. Free of the bonds of extolling his own service, Stanford has some unusual advice: "People should get a service with a strong backbone, like Demon, and then get a free account on top." That's one possible approach; but for those taking their first run at the information superhighway, it's a good idea to think carefully before you choose.

The common-sense approach is to get it right first time, rather than after having had an unsatisfactory experience. Yet a survey by market research company Inteco found that most consumers' choice of an ISP was anything but a well thought out decision.

The top three factors affecting home internet subscribers' choices were free trial discs, followed by magazines, then word of mouth. The basis of people's decisions to get on to the internet was curiosity, although peer-group pressure was also an important motivating factor. Despite opting for free trials, a large number of consumers were put off by the idea of giving out their credit card

TESTING TIME ON THE NET

A more objective way to test internet performance might be to use Net.Medic software, an evaluation copy of which can be downloaded free of charge from www.wickhill.com. The possible causes of poor internet performance include your PC, local servers, modem, telecoms provider, your ISP, the internet itself and the remote web site

you are visiting. Net.Medic is designed to identify the location of the bottleneck. Net.Medic Pro additionally includes diagnostic and automatic monitoring capabilities to continuously test and improve performance. The evaluation copy is very basic: it gave me a graphic of the speed of internet downloads and

instructed me that I was running out of memory. Net.Medic is a useful tool, but it is no substitute for careful analysis. Distributors Wick Hill are targeting the Net.Medic software range at IT professionals, web masters and ISPs.

► **NET.MEDIC** ANALYSES ALL THE ELEMENTS THAT COULD BE RESPONSIBLE FOR POOR NET PERFORMANCE



details, while others had experienced or heard of problems when cancelling a subscription at the end of a trial period.

For example, uninstalling Freeserve has proved to be a particular bone of contention among netizens (those who use the net). The software makes changes to various Windows defaults which can prevent other access software from working. Exasperation is compounded by widely reported difficulties in uninstalling the software. In Windows 98, because two main components of Freeserve, IE4 and Outlook Express, are integrated, complete exorcism involves editing the Windows Registry. PC owners left with despoiled desktops and inoperative software are further faced with a technical helpline charging £1 a minute.

Mark Danby, Freeserve's general manager, admitted it was not easy to uninstall FreeServe, but maintained, "That's down to Bill Gates and how IE4 is set up." A section on uninstalling Freeserve has now been added to its web site.

Paradoxically, Inteco found that although free trials were the most used route to choosing an ISP, consumers actually thought their value was minimal compared to reliability of service and overall subscription price. Heavier users found existing subscription fees reasonable and were even prepared to pay more for a faster service. The opinion of these heavier users was that faster access wouldn't really cost users more, even if the tariff were slightly higher.

"Dixons' Freeserve could be regarded as the 'mother of all free trials' and may meet with short-term success as a consequence," says Inteco researcher Adam Daum. "But ultimately it will live or die by the quality and reliability of its service. If it falls below the standards set by other ISPs and compounds this by charging for support, it will not succeed. Non-subscribers, who will need more handholding, are wary of racking up high telephone bills. Premium rate numbers ring alarm bells for these people," says Daum. "I imagine quite a few will sign up and then leave at the first sign of problems rather than pay to resolve them. The challenge for Dixons is to offer a totally reliable service — like a utility — so support doesn't become an issue."

In general, Inteco's research showed that the more cyber-savvy users are willing to try non-brand ISPs. Those who changed service provider did so mainly because of poor experiences such as slow access, engaged lines and poor helpdesks.

Less high-profile ISPs, like U-net and NetDirect, earned readers' endorsements in the PCW survey of service and reliability carried out in the October '98 issue. Looking at ratings for setup and connection, technical support, connection speed and quality of content, it was not the industry behemoths that fared best: "The clientele of NetDirect is completely

WHAT THE PEOPLE SAY



➤ **"I used AOL first** but now I'm using Freeserve. I worked out the maths and it was free. So who am I going to pick? The connections do put you out at times. I'm not paying a penny so I've got to allow for one or two problems."

SACHIN SHAH, IT CONSULTANT, LONDON

➤ **"BBC2 did a review** of the top ten ISPs and published it on its web site. We give students that page. We've had a deal through U-net going for 12 months now, which has worked out well. We've not had many queries about the free deal. My basic advice to students is to phone ISPs."

MARTIN SIDGREAVES, SENIOR PROGRAMMER,
UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH



'To be honest, I wouldn't spend time choosing. YOU CAN ALWAYS CLOSE AN ACCOUNT and go somewhere else'



➤ **"I had AOL,** which had its own GUI [Graphical User Interface]. If you're interested in getting on the internet, it's not worth having. Freeserve? There must be some catch — adverts or something. Nowadays I get access with Demon, through work. We have an ISDN line and normally we don't have any problems. I want the actual internet, not GUIs. If I were to advise my friends, I'd say 'go with Demon'. Some of my friends have cable and

use it to surf between 7pm and 7am. Well, it's cheap, so I guess it's a good idea."

NICK GIBBONS, TECHNICAL SUPPORT OFFICER,
NT SQUARED

➤ **"When I come to choose an ISP** I'll look around in magazines and ask people. I'll look at what people have to offer, especially web services. That would be my main reason to choose. I need the ability to choose web applications. The ability to support CGI scripts and programs like Microsoft Front Page is important. Demon is pretty good, but not AOL. To be honest, I wouldn't spend time choosing. You can always close an account and go somewhere else."

DR PETER SMIELEWSKI, RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE



CHECKLIST FOR CHOOSING AN ISP

Here's a list of things to consider when choosing an ISP.

1. Draw up a list of what you want from the internet. Support for development tools like Microsoft Front Page, spam-blocking facilities and large web space might be high on this list.

2. What is the ratio of customers to modems used by your potential ISP? Home users will probably be satisfied with a ratio of 20:1, although they may experience busy dial tones. Does your

potential ISP support the V.90 modem standard and ISDN?

3. Does it route internet traffic with all major UK networks instead of going via the US (known as peering)?

4. Is your potential service provider dependent on another ISP?

5. Is the access software provided easy to use and install? And uninstall?

6. Is less than 20 percent of the ISP's core capacity presently used?

7. Does its network have a 100 percent availability record? Does it

include resilience in its network by using more than one telecommunications carrier? This is becoming rarer.

8. Does it guarantee service speed across its network?

9. Is there 24-hour, 365-day support?

10. Is its annual turnover rate of customers less than one percent? Does anyone recommend them? At least check whether they have a web site — there are some cowboys out there.

11. Does it give test log-ins to check speed and performance?

different to that of online service providers. The latter are just not geared up to deliver," said a NetDirect spokesman. "For example, we support 128Kbps ISDN at no extra cost. We also register accounts and domains."

Other service providers are differentiating themselves by enhancing the content they provide or emphasising their links to a locality or a particular profession. Yet many end-users opt to stay put with an ISP even in the face of abysmal service, primarily because there's a belief that changing ISPs is "a hassle" and that all ISPs are very similar.

If you're a small business, how difficult it is to change your ISP depends on the extent of the business relationship you have with that ISP and whether there are any contracts involved. If

not its software, technical support or pricing. But the use of new internet technology, web caching, casts doubt on whether these tests fulfil even this limited objective. Web caching is a technology which allows ISPs to locate frequently accessed content locally, the idea of which is to speed up end-user access to data.

According to caching company Mirror Image Internet, certain ISPs (which it is unwilling to name) can identify the email request from any test lab which tries to measure the performance and reliability of an ISP. Instead of downloading the material from a remote internet site, the material is downloaded from a local cache, giving the illusion of a much speedier service. The effect is like certain recording artistes making purchases at record stores which are

used for chart returns, so that the record will be perceived as popular which will, in turn, boost sales.

The difficulty of choosing an ISP is compounded by the complexity and speed of change of a nascent market. Potential internet users

must first do their homework. They can visit the web site of those ISPs under consideration and find out who are its customers. These people can be approached for a clear, objective view of what the service is really like and whether it fulfils a service provider's promise of performance, facilities support and technical support.

This is far more difficult than the "no brainer" decision of using a cover disc, but it is worthwhile since you will end up getting a service that gives you the best value for money and meets your needs. Like banks, ISPs can appear strikingly similar, but making the wrong choice will land you with an account that gives you poor rates of return. ■

Many end-users OPT TO STAY PUT WITH AN ISP EVEN IN THE FACE OF ABYSMAL SERVICE, because there's a belief that changing ISPs is a 'hassle'

you're simply an enthusiast, then the problem is not too serious as it would only involve notifying everyone who is likely to send you email. If you are running a small business with a web site, the problem is more serious and would involve reconfiguring your network, administration issues such as dealing with customers, and potentially legal issues.

One approach to comparing ISPs is by running tests to measure their performance in terms of speed and reliability by trying a particular, undisclosed list of sites at random intervals. This produces results highlighting the quality and the infrastructure of an ISP,

PCW CONTACTS

Demon Internet www.demon.net
Dixons FreeServe www.freeserve.com
LINX www.linx.net
Wick Hill www.wickhill.com