

Higher broadband costs a given

By DAVID T. HUGHES
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Newspaper coverage encompasses a wide area, with many different political and "technical" jurisdictions. However, I have found over the years that what happens in Fairfax County, Va., where I reside, usually ends up being echoed elsewhere sooner or later.

That being said, let me talk about the recent notices by area providers that they will be hiking the cost of broadband services. If you do any kind of market analysis, you should realize that broadband has been under priced almost since its inception to build the market.

DSL is one example. One of my former employers was one of the few Internet providers involved with Bell Atlantic when it offered inexpensive high-speed connectivity to test how well it worked. Then ADSL was introduced regionally and nationally based on the lessons learned from those initial customers. But now, service is a slower and more expensive version of what was tested.

Some of the ISPs involved in that test no longer are offering DSL services, or have gone out of business because the profit margins involved are so slim.

One of the reasons these costs continue to rise is the demand for customer service. Having worked on that side of the business for many years, I can tell you no matter what anyone pays for their connectivity, each demands the same level of customer service.

Tech support personnel don't grow on trees, and broadband providers have learned an expensive lesson: Factor in the costs of clueless people trying to connect to the Internet or go out of business.

My cable provider, Cox Communications, recently announced it is dumping its business arrangement with Road Runner in favor of its own network. And the company will raise rates to help pay for the transition and the cost of doubling its tech support personnel.

Part of the fallout is that if you use Cox's broadband connection's e-mail services, your address will change. Loyal readers will remember several columns I have penned rela-

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ted to keeping e-mail addresses: Don't plan on it unless you have a domain name and pay a few bucks a year for e-mail services.

The upside is that Cox will allow its high-speed service users to have more e-mail addresses.

Cox also is aligning its cost increase to its television services. If you do have basic service, expect to pay an additional \$5 or so a month for the new service. That's a little more than a 10 percent increase, but not unreasonable to my way of thinking IF — and that's a big IF — it follows through on better customer support.

I realize that, as the popularity of broadband grows, the cable company must invest in more network connectivity, more routers, switches, etc., and all that stuff costs money.

Anyone who says that a \$5 increase is too much and opts to go back to dialup is only shooting themselves in the foot.

Broadband access to the Net, whether through some flavor of DSL service or through cable television, is competitively priced. But the price will continue to increase, just like other staples of life.

However, as costs increase, providers also must realize that consumers will hold them to their word on service and will be quicker to demand credit for down time, etc.

Digital snapshots

Veteran readers of my weekly tome know I have an affection for the products made by the X-10 Corp. and anxiously await its newest goodie.

Well, the company has done it again with its Showtime product. If you or family members have gotten involved in the exploding hobby of digital photography, one of the things quickly becoming apparent is how to view your photos in a family setting. It's easy to display the images on your computer screen, but that's a poor venue, especially if you have a cramped computer area.

Wouldn't it be great to see those photos on the big screen TV without any hassle? X-10's

new Showtime product fills that bill very well. Plus, there is no need to be a rocket scientist to hook up everything.

The kit comes with a 2.4-mhz transmitter and receiver, along with a special cable to hook into your computer and monitor, and a new RF remote to control everything from anywhere in the house. Software for your PC is downloaded from X-10, along with the appropriate code.

Instructions are clear; within 10 to 15 minutes users can view their digital photos on any television in the home where the receiver is attached. We have a 60-inch TV in the family viewing area upstairs and my computer is downstairs. But once I hooked up the Showtime system, we were laughing at my son's antics in the Florida surf on the big screen, not our tiny 17-inch computer monitor. I took almost 200 pictures during our trip and we viewed them all.

The software that comes with Showtime allows users to create captions, rotate images, create scrapbooks from image files, search those books for specific images and more.

Another, undocumented use for this system is to hook the receiver to the video tape video-in jacks on the back and copy your images to tape to send to friends who do not have a computer.

The remote control also allows users to zoom in on a photo with little or no degradation of the image.

Learn more about this product at www.x10.com. There is an introductory half-price sale of \$140. I give this a solid 10 on the Hughes Buymeter, especially if you take a lot of digital pictures. After all, the main reason to print pictures is to look at them once or twice and then put them in an album. Now you can see your photos anytime on your television and save all that money on prints.

Webcrawlers' corner will be back next week.

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