



Full Speed Ahead

TIME IS OF the essence for the true automated agent. Anything that enables the producer to be more productive is a step in the right direction. Looking back over the years and my experiences with the Internet, I thought I would share some of the joys and disappointments through which my office has journeyed.

Like almost everyone, our office started out with a basic dial-up service, 28.8 kbps to be exact. Through the years, as technology progressed, so did the connection speeds. As surfing increased, the slow connections became annoying. Don't get me wrong; we all were thrilled in the early days of Internet surfing just to be able to see anything that was not installed on our, own computers. Then along came 56 kbps modems and we were content once again with the speed gains for a little while longer. But eventually, our office needed more. To quench this "webaholic" thirst, ISDN was the next, logical step. Again we were tamed for another year or two cruising the Internet at a lightning 128 kbps. All that of course, is ancient history now.

DSL service became available in some areas a few years ago and availability continues to grow. Cable and satellite-based services also have come on strong. It therefore was with great delight that we recently found out that we could obtain broadband service in our area. Broadband, after all is the creme-de-'la-creme of Internet service. As soon as we 'could obtain it, We jumped on board. Ahhhh, surfing heaven, finally!

So, having tested the waters of high-speed Internet connectivity, now comes the big debate. Which high-speed service is better if there is a choice? I highly recommend www.dslreports.com. A stop here before signing up with any high-speed provider will save the producer much aggravation. This Web site will help answer most questions for anyone who is not sure about which Internet service provider to use. Here the producer can find reviews, statistics, testing tools, and individual users' experiences with any of the service providers in his or her area by simply entering a ZIP code.

The Gift of Sharing

It is not surprising to find that many agents are confused about how to share an Internet connection with others on a network. My first-hand experience has shown that this can be a frustrating and complicated step to implement successfully. Microsoft has implemented "ICS" (internet connection sharing) in most of its personal operating systems since Windows 98. ICS can be found by going to Add/Remove programs -> Windows Setup and double clicking on the "Internet" options.

In some scenarios, depending on the producers' computer system and network, a proxy server might be needed. This is particularly true for users implementing Microsoft NT or Microsoft Server products that allow for the use of enhanced security in a networked environment.

I will be the first to say that there are too many proxy servers and options available. It is difficult to assess which one to purchase.

Having tried and used several, my office has settled on products available from www.avirt.com. For ease of use and reliability, no other product has come close. Every program we use works seamlessly, including video conferencing. No complicated setup is involved. Simply install the software and answer a few questions, and the producer never will have to worry about his Internet sharing setup again.

Who Is Watching the Back Door?

With the advent of ever-faster connection speeds comes the growing problem of hackers trying to get into the producer's computer. Knowing how to defend against hacking is becoming increasingly important. www.grc.com and the before mentioned www.dslreports.com both offer fantastic insight into this problem. At both of these Web sites, the producer will find scanning tools that can point out security lapses he never even may have known existed in his own computer. Considering that most PCs contain at least some information that should be kept private, running a few of these scans from time to time is important.

Once the producer has found that there are security issues to be addressed, a simple and free fix is available from www.zonelabs.com. Here the producer can find a program called Zone Alarm. The personal edition of this firewall program is free for all to download, while the business and enhanced versions are available for a nominal price. Setting up a firewall properly will take some time and a little trial and error; however, plenty of information and advice are available online.

A Warning to the Wise

While most service providers claim that they provide a firewall, don't be fooled. Their systems may be good when up and running, but on occasion they experience problems as well. In thoroughly testing

our systems, we have discovered that without a firewall in place, some scans showed vulnerabilities to our service providers' protection. This only proves that firewall protection is a must on any computer that a producer may have connected to the Internet.

Recently our high-speed connection went down. A call to our service provider revealed that everyone in an eight state area was out of service and that the provider was working on the problem. My office needed to complete some business online, so we used an old dial-up service. Taking a step backward to a 56 kbps modem was a painful experience; we quickly realized how much time our office used to spend in the worldwide wait. Thankfully, the outage lasted only a day and we were back up to speed.

Don't Tweak It!

The producer might be tempted to purchase products that are touted to increase the speed of the, Internet connection by "tweaking" settings on the producer's computer. Don't be fooled by these claims. These programs usually will provide no additional speed and in some cases even may render the Internet connection unusable. If the producer's Internet connection is not fast enough, he should do himself a favor and purchase a service that can bring him up to full speed instead.

After a producer invests in the decision to obtain high-speed Internet service, he never will accept anything less. Protecting computers becomes increasingly important as the speeds over the World Wide Web increase. The producer should invest a little time to educate himself about it. With the proper protection and right provider, high-speed Internet service is truly a dream come true.