



Heavens! I Must Be Beaming

I ALWAYS have been curious about satellite-based high-speed Internet service. Having high-speed cable access where I live had prevented me from exploring it as an option to going online. I guess sometimes we take things for granted. I have had high-speed access for some time now, so it feels to me like it was always there. Much like having telephone or electric service, I must remind myself that this is not always the case.

Thanks to a good friend of mine who recently had a house built a fair distance from town, I finally had a chance to try it out. Having regressed from the high-speed Internet service where he used to live, he explained, "Going back to dial-up access was absolutely the worst. Imagine not having a car and having to walk everywhere, that's what it feels like." With no other alternative available to him, he went out and purchased a satellite-based system.

Beaming from Home

The good news is that high-speed satellite based Internet service is a reality, and it works ... somewhat. While it is not an ideal solution for everyone, it offers producers with few other options an alternative to dial-up. Several different vendors including Earthlink, Aol, and Direcway offer the service with pricing plans generally in the \$49 to \$69 a month range for home-based use. Also, several vendors offer business packages with higher bandwidth and download capacities and differing pricing structures.

Satellite Internet systems are offered in two configurations: a one-way system that sends data out over the telephone line and receives it back via the satellite dish (cost: about \$170) and a two-way system that both sends and receives all the information through the dish (cost: about \$800, less any promotional incentives). The dish required for satellite Internet is substantially larger than the small 18-inch ones used for satellite TV. Also, FCC regulations require microwave-transmitting devices, meaning any two-way systems satellite system, to be installed by a licensed technician.

This can add another \$200 or more to the cost.

My friend opted for the one-way system and self-installation because there is not much benefit to the two-way system speed-wise (more on that later). Mounting the dish, running the cable, and hooking it up took about two hours. Pointing the dish and aligning it to the correct spot in the sky took an additional six hours. We both agreed that the professional installation is probably worth the cost, considering the time and effort it took to install.

While download speeds are good and on average up to 1 mbps or better, the two biggest drawbacks to satellite-based Internet service are latency and upload speeds. There simply is no way to overcome the amount of time it takes for a signal to travel 22,000 miles into space and back. This fact introduces delays that greatly hamper the traditional high-speed experience. Additionally, system limitations prevent upload speeds from being much better than dial-up. While the two-way system eliminates the need for an additional telephone line and is an always-on connection, the cost of the equipment can be substantially more.

Several other problems that eventually may be corrected also continue to reduce the appeal of satellite-based Internet. Rain may cause the satellite signal to be lost during heavy downpours, rendering the system useless for short periods. Also, all subscribers share the system's bandwidth. During peak periods of use, a definite slowdown in transfer speeds is noticed. Surfing at 4 a.m. when there are few users online is a dream compared to trying to use it at 8 p.m.

The system really shines, though, when downloading large files. Here performance rivals that of cable or DSL.

Beaming on the Go

Recently Datastorm Technologies (<http://www.motosat.com/>) introduced a new fully automatic two-way system that may be installed on an RV or mobile office, enabling the producer truly to become the agent on the go that I always have talked about. While it still is pending final FCC approval, the thought that I would be able to have high-speed Internet almost anywhere immediately sparked my attention.

While still pricey, the system folds flat for travel and can auto-locate the satellite and be up and running again in less than 10 minutes. Again, because it is a two-way system, a licensed technician must perform this installation.

Imagine having a networked mobile office where several agents could meet with prospects and still access information via the Internet or a company's extranet. Conceivably the network could be expanded with wireless technology enabling an agent within a reasonable

distance of the mobile office to use a laptop and enter client data in real time to the company's main database, play streaming video, or obtain documents and information.

Beaming around the Office

For the past 10 years we have been on the lookout for a handheld wireless device that would be capable of transmitting and receiving voice, data, and video simultaneously. I recently was introduced to just such technology in an early beta version.

My firm's conceptual model would enable the Automated Agent to work with documents while also video recording the meeting. Additionally, it would enable the agent to bring in specialists by videoconference, show product specific presentations, look up real-time information, and obtain digital signatures. We are in the early stages of working to customize this device for the financial and insurance business. I look forward to sharing our progress with readers in the future.

Beaming It Forward

Satellite-based Internet access opens the world of high-speed data to everyone regardless of location. While it is not the perfect solution one would hope for, it offers a promising alternative. Having access to high-speed Internet service from a mobile office arrangement opens the door for future sales models yet to be defined. Beaming our products, services, and specialists to the customers while simplifying the entire sales process truly is the wave of the future.