



## CHECK ISP CONNECTIONS, ACCESS NUMBERS AND EXPERIENCE

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A local television station asked me last week to comment on choosing an Internet service provider. Although informative, the news segment only touched on some of the details a small business or consumer should consider when picking a new service.

Here is a more detailed report.

First, ask prospective Internet service providers several questions. The simplest is how long have they been an ISP?

Not surprisingly, it takes ISPs time to tweak their technology and learn the rhythms of many people using their systems simultaneously to reach the Internet.

Here's a basic two-part question with important repercussions: How many local access numbers does the company offer, and is it a national provider?

Access numbers are restricted to area codes. This allows users to dial into the Internet without paying long-distance charges. Some companies have 10 area codes, others offer local numbers across the country.

This detail is significant for users who do a lot of traveling. For travelers, companies offer 800 numbers, but consumers pay for the service, either through long-distance charges or other fees.

Some people believe it is cheaper to go online, pay a small long-distance charge, download their electronic mail and then drop off-line. Users can then answer their mail and simply redial to send the finished notes.

Another alternative is to go with a nationally connected provider.

Moving beyond telephone numbers, there are a couple of good technical questions that will help predict a company's reliability.

The first is what is the user-to-modem ratio? The industry standard is 40 to 50 users connecting into a single line. However, local companies suggest the lower, the better.

Another basic question that tells a lot is how is the company connected to the Internet?

At an ISP, there is a lot of behind-the-scenes hardware. This is the company's connection, or pipe, to the Internet.

Most ISP providers should have a minimum of a T-1 line or better. A T-1 line is a high-speed telecommunication data link.

But please, don't take just my advice. Some great Web sites can help you do your own research. Those include:

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<http://isps.com>: a how-to site;

<http://www.thelist.com>: information on a comprehensive list of providers; and

<http://www.efnet.net>: an Internet Relay Chat site for people who want to talk about their providers.

Firms that helped with this advice include Internet Junction, Dunedin; U.S. Technologies/Digital Chainsaw, Tampa; and K.Tek Systems, Palm Harbor.

### Convergence Teams Up

NorthPoint Communications Inc., a competitive local exchange carrier based in San Francisco well known for providing digital subscriber lines to businesses, has teamed with Tampa-based Convergence Inc., to provide the Tampa Bay area with broadband connections.

### Internet Use Surging

The Sun Coast Technology Alliance, a private group developed to encourage and build technology-based businesses in Sarasota, offered some compelling Internet numbers at its October meeting.

According to Yankee Group research, there's a new Internet user every two seconds, and by 2001, 156 million people will be users, up from 90 million today.

Business to consumer e-commerce will grow from \$4.9 billion, as reported for 1998, to \$10 billion in sales by 2000.

In 1998, \$34 billion in business was conducted electronically. This year that number has grown to \$90 billion and by 2000 it will have reached \$171 billion annually.

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