

12 Selecting an ISP



Want to research via the net and email clients? We'll help you select the best Internet Service Provider (ISP) for you.

To begin, there are four key criteria to consider.

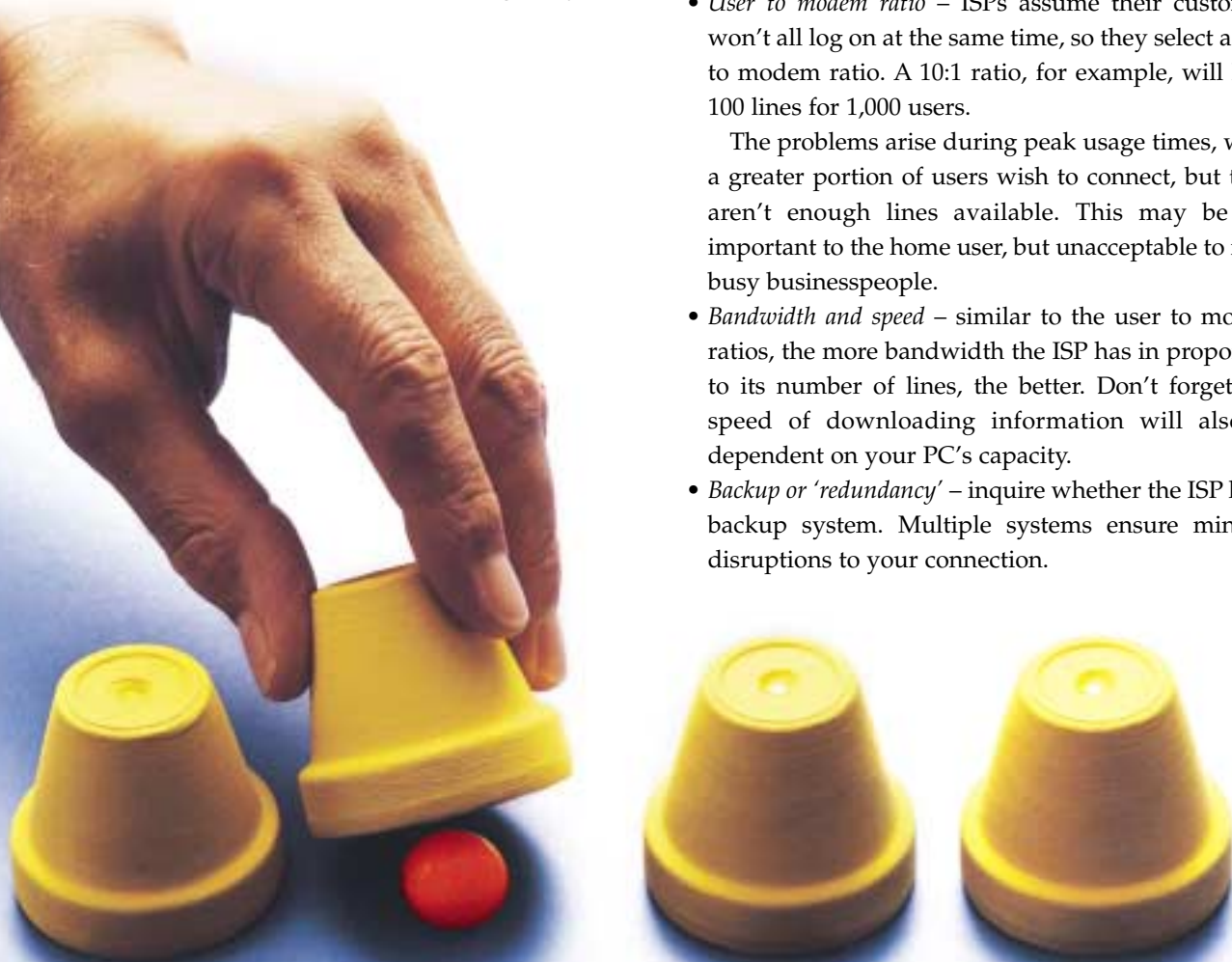
1. Location – referred to as Point Of Presence or POP. It's critical you select an ISP with a local POP, or risk paying STD phone rates each time you log on.

2. Customer service – free technical support via a local or toll-free number should be provided. In addition, ensure their help-line is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Some of the smaller operators only provide support within business hours. Others have insufficient staff in their call centres, which results in long delays.

3. Reliability – some ISP connections are notorious for 'going down' or running at an excruciatingly slow pace. These often happen within business hours when the demands on their network are at a peak. Obviously no supplier will admit to this, so speak with colleagues who are already online and find out how their ISPs fare.

Whilst there are always mitigating circumstances outside of the ISP's control, the following criteria greatly impact the availability and reliability of your connection.

- *Network set-up* – you may come across the term 'tier one' (or 'top tier') and 'tier two' ISPs. Tier one ISPs have their own network; tier two rely on the former to serve their own customers.
- *User to modem ratio* – ISPs assume their customers won't all log on at the same time, so they select a user to modem ratio. A 10:1 ratio, for example, will have 100 lines for 1,000 users.
The problems arise during peak usage times, when a greater portion of users wish to connect, but there aren't enough lines available. This may be less important to the home user, but unacceptable to most busy businesspeople.
- *Bandwidth and speed* – similar to the user to modem ratios, the more bandwidth the ISP has in proportion to its number of lines, the better. Don't forget, the speed of downloading information will also be dependent on your PC's capacity.
- *Backup or 'redundancy'* – inquire whether the ISP has a backup system. Multiple systems ensure minimal disruptions to your connection.



4. Cost – whilst this is always a consideration, it should never be the sole criteria.

The cost will be largely dependent on whether you select 'timed usage' (a predetermined period of time per month) or 'unlimited usage'. The risk of timed usage is that if you exceed the limit, any additional online time is charged at a high rate. In addition, some ISPs also charge for downloading of information.

Business connections, whilst marginally more expensive, are well worth the investment.

ISPs recognise the need for greater reliability for businesses, which is why they provide (amongst other things) superior customer support and better user to modem ratios. This means less down time for you, with fewer instances of being disconnected or not being able to log on.

A business connection also enables you to maximise one of the greatest benefits of the internet – immediacy. If you're only dialling in and gaining access to your emails once a day (or every few days), you may as well be using traditional post. Internet protocol dictates that a response to an email should mirror a telephone message – well within 24 hours and preferably within a few hours. A business connection enables you to receive (and respond to) emails instantly because you are connected 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This also means you don't pay phone call charges each time you log on to the internet, providing you savings in the longer term.

Hidden costs

Choosing an ISP is much the same as selecting any business supplier. But when comparing on price alone, bear in mind the hidden costs to your business – the cost of inconveniencing your clients.

Repeatedly changing from one free introductory offer to the next, for example, is fine if you're using the web for personal use and only confusing friends with your ever-changing email address. As a business, however, you should approach a change of email address as seriously as you would a change of phone number or postal address.

Another common mistake (which may seem harmless at first) is using your telephone line to log on to the net.

Searching the internet can be a frustrating experience, even for the most seasoned web surfer. With the number of internet sites increasing every day, it's often hard to avoid information overload. Following are some tips that will help you streamline your web searches and optimise your results:

- **Narrow your search by being as specific as you can:** for example, if you are looking for information on beagles, don't search for 'dogs'.
- **Use phrases inside quotes instead of single words:** search for 'Marks Brothers' movies instead of 'Marks' and 'movies'.
- **If you get too many hits, think of ways to narrow your search:** use more specific words or phrases to query the search engine.
- **Use more than one search engine:** each search engine indexes the web in different ways. By using several search engines you will find more useful information.
- **Take a look at the online help provided by your favourite search engines:** you can learn some neat tricks by reading the instructions or 'help information' offered by the search engine, especially for 'advanced searches'.
- **Use 'and' or '+' to narrow your searches:** link two or more key words or phrases together with 'and' or '+'. If you live in Hobart and want to find beagles there; *Beagles and Hobart* will limit your search to pages with both items. You will then not get hits from the thousands of websites that contain 'beagles' outside of Hobart.

In effect, this blocks your clients from reaching you each time you go online. A half hour on the net will seem a lifetime to a client trying to call you and unable to get through. Business connections have their own line (via phone or cable), meaning client calls are never blocked.

A complete listing of all Australian ISPs, along with a brief summary of each, can be found at cynosure.com.au/isp In making your final selection, speak to colleagues about their online experiences and ensure the ISP's offering matches your needs.

Article provided by LUCID Marketing Communications, a Melbourne-based marketing and PR agency specialising in combining new and traditional means of promotion.