

Is cable or DSL faster? It really depends

By ARATI BECHTEL

Q. Which is faster, DSL or cable for a high-speed Internet connection from my home?

A. Although this question seems ripe for a one-word answer, it's not as simple as that. You've probably heard various claims about the Internet connection speeds of cable and DSL, or digital subscriber line. For instance, you might have heard that cable will be slower as the number of online users in an area increases. But then, some say the bigger bandwidth of cable makes it faster than DSL. Others argue that DSL and cable offer essentially the same speed.

Helping to clear the confusion is Ben Wisnasky, an IT consultant with Work Smart, a Durham company.

Wisnasky confirms that because the "pipe" of a cable connection is usually a lot wider than a telephone connection, cable tends to be faster than DSL.

Yet it's also true that cable's speed will dip if several people or businesses in the vicinity use it simultaneously because the Internet connection is shared with other subscribers.

That's not so with DSL, which offers a dedicated connection, i.e., belonging to your home or office.

With DSL, your speed is "usually limited by the wire coming into your house and how far you are located from the terminating phone station. If you are right next to it, your speed is going to be outstanding; however, if you are at the end of the line, your speed will suffer," Wisnasky explains.

To qualify for BellSouth DSL, for instance, your phone line needs to be within 18,000 feet (or about 3.4 miles) of the phone termination station, which is often called the central office or central station.

With ADSL, or asymmetric DSL, which is the most common type of DSL, you will have faster speeds when downloading than uploading. That's why it's asymmetric. Also note that there are different types of DSL services available, some faster than others. An example is BellSouth's FastAccess DSL Lite, which is slower than regular DSL but faster than dial-up access.

If you are trying to decide between cable and DSL, Wisnasky says you should consider three main factors: the population of your area, which will give you a clue about how many other potential customers could be using the cable pipeline at the same time; your distance from the phone termination station; and the quality, condition and age of the phone lines and cable lines in your area.

Wisnasky recommends cable if you don't live or work in a large metropolitan area and if cable is available, because he believes the overall average speed potential of cable is higher for about the same price. But if you do live or work in a densely populated area, he says, find out how far you are from the phone termination station and consider whether DSL might indeed be a faster connection for you.

Q. I want to use my Windows computer to do video and audio messaging with my relatives abroad. I've got a PC camera and a microphone hooked up and working. Now what do I do?

A. Assuming your relatives also have a PC camera and microphone, you could try messaging with audio and video using a free service, such as Yahoo Messenger or MSN Messenger. Both of these services require you (and your relatives) to download messaging software, sign up for an account and, of course, have Internet access.

Both parties will need to use the same messaging service to communicate.

When you and your family are ready to meet online, open the messaging program and invite your relatives to a messaging session either by selecting from a list of your online contacts or typing in an ID, depending on the service you use.

In the instant message window, you and your relatives can click the "Webcam" button to invite each other to view your Webcams.

If you and your family have speakers and a sound card in your computers, you should be able to try voice messaging as well. In the instant message window, look for a button or icon labeled "voice" or "audio." Clicking this button invites your relatives to enable voice.

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