

Instant Link

Satellite broadband dials up fast BY KAREN J. BANNAN

Five years ago, living too far from your phone company's central office or outside your cable company's footprint limited your Internet options to dial-up and satellite broadband. Unfortunately, both had their limitations. Dial-up—even today—is slow and cumbersome, and that is assuming you can get connected. Earlier generations of satellite service let you download files, web pages and e-mail quickly, but transmitted upstream requests—outgoing e-mails, web page requests and file uploads—via a phone line, which is not exactly state-of-the-art telecommunication.

Realizing that customers would not pay a premium for what was essentially a glorified dial-up service, companies such as Hughes Network Systems, StarBand Communications and WildBlue Communications have introduced new two-way high-speed broadband services that eliminate the need for a telephone uplink and are perfect for vacation homes in remote locations.

Satellite broadband equipment resembles that used for satellite television: a small, round dish that faces the southern sky and a modem that plugs into your computer. Satellite broadband service acts much like its cable and DSL brethren, always on and always available; there is no dialing into a phone bank or waiting for a connection. Unlike most cable and DSL providers that subsidize equipment and charge a small monthly rental fee, setting up satellite service and purchasing equipment costs between \$300 and \$1,000 up-front. Monthly fees—between \$50 and \$75—are about the same as for other broadband options.

WildBlue Communications, which launches its residential broadband this year, says its service will offer 1.5 Mbps downstream—files downloading to your PC from the Internet—and 256 Kbps upstream. StarBand Communications is offering its service at 150 to 500 Kbps downstream. Upstream speeds mirror WildBlue's 256 Kbps. Hughes' Direcway service is 500 Kbps downstream and 50 Kbps upstream. Comparatively, cable modem services claim they can hit 10 Mbps downstream and DSL providers cite download speeds between 1.5 and 3 Mbps. In real-world terms, downloading a high-resolution photo using DSL or satellite will take about 25 seconds.

"Satellite broadband suits the average user's needs in terms of available bandwidth and an always-on connection, so unless someone is looking for speeds of 4 or 5 Mbps, it's a good option," says Mike Paxton, senior analyst with research firm In-Stat, based in Scottsdale, Ariz. "If you're working at home and sending mostly e-mail or Word or Excel files, it's more than enough bandwidth." And Brad Greenwald, vice president of business development and marketing for WildBlue Communications, based in Greenwood Village, Colo., claims satellite connections are reliable and secure. "Everything is encrypted during the transmission processes," he says. "There's no additional risk because it's a wireless service, so executives can feel comfortable working from a home office."

Unlike satellite TV's susceptibility to bad weather—heavy snow or rain can hinder your signal—the elements generally won't interrupt your Internet connection. "Satellite broadband can offer 99.99 percent uptime," says Paxton. "And if there is some interference, the only thing you'll notice is that everything just slows down a little."

Direcway, www.getdway.com

StarBand Communications, 800.478.2722, www.starband.com

WildBlue Communications, 720.554.7400, www.wildblue.com

