

Providers seek ways to increase broadband service penetration

Friday, July 21, 2006 - Bangor Daily News

Editor's Note: This is the sixth report in a multipart series about the availability of broadband Internet service in Maine.

BY PETER J. BROWN

SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Many competing smaller broadband service providers use the networks of much larger telephone companies to reach their customers. For this reason, asking this group to extend deeper into the unserved areas of Maine is not feasible, according to Stephen R. Perry, product manager at Oxford Networks in Lewiston, because these competing firms are limited by the network capabilities of the owners of the networks they use.

Overall, Oxford Networks considers its efforts a success to date, although quite a way from completion.

"Oxford Networks continues to look for technologies that would allow us to offer broadband to an even greater percentage of our telephone company customers. As repair and replacement cycles come up for implementation, the company is looking for ways to leverage that cost into deeper penetration of broadband," said Perry.

"Oxford Networks would like to be able to be the [broadband service] provider for all of our customers, but the reality is, in some instances, satellite is a better solution for some of our telephone customers."

By investing in its Schools and Libraries Project, Maine state government has been able to make it clear that broadband access is important, according to Perry.

"From the Public Utilities Commission to the governor himself, there has been a constant drumbeat that has not wavered, even from one administration to the next. They all agree that expanding broadband access as fast as possible and to as many people as possible is critical to the state's ability to grow, compete and prosper. It would be hard to imagine a company that has not heard that drumbeat and in some way responded to it," said Perry, who adds that rural customers are seeing more wireless broadband service options.

"When you look at the needed investment in infrastructure, wireless appears to have an advantage," said Perry.

One form of wireless broadband service is delivered by satellite. According to Perry, satellite suffers from a perception that its speed is limited, that it is relatively expensive, and that customer support can be a problem.

Perry adds, however, that today most of the technology and capacity issues that plagued early satellite services have been improved, and customer service is able to respond to a wider range of issues more effectively. Satellite signals still have to be transmitted from the ground to the satellite and back to the ground again, which takes more time than a direct land-based

connection. This lag or latency can influence the overall customer experience.

"The longer the lag, the more frustrating the experience can be. Satellite companies have worked hard to upgrade the equipment they provide to customers and they themselves use to minimize latency as much as possible," said Perry.

Ben Maddocks, acting manager at Satellite Component Engineering in Ellsworth - referred to as Bucky's by most locals - spends a considerable amount of time addressing some of the misconceptions surrounding satellite broadband. Last fall, the Maddocks family, which played a major role in the introduction of satellite TV Down East starting more than two decades ago, began offering a new satellite broadband system from Colorado-based WildBlue Communications. This new system has taken off like a rocket, according to Maddocks.

"Today, thanks to WildBlue, it appears that many of the problems that plagued satellite [in the past] have been fixed," said Maddocks. "Highest on the list of customer complaints was reliability, especially during rain and snow. Our experience with WildBlue to date suggests close to a 98 percent customer satisfaction, definitely the best we have ever seen when compared to the alternatives."

The installed price is less than \$300, which catches many interested buyers off guard. Even the PUC Web site continues to list the average installed price for satellite broadband at more than \$700.

"WildBlue represents the superior wireless option, in my book. WildBlue reaches every corner of the state, something that is currently not possible or even feasible with fixed wireless, or Wi-Fi, solutions," Maddocks said.

He reports that nobody from the state or the Broadband Access Infrastructure Board - created by the governor to address broadband issues - attempted to contact him. Various reports and the PUC Web site make no mention of WildBlue, and nobody has contacted Maddocks about Maine's strategy for improving broadband access, satellite-enabled or not.

"Why the state has purposefully excluded satellite broadband from its strategic planning in this area is perplexing as this attitude is placing a large segment of Maine's population at a distinct disadvantage," said Maddocks.

Maddocks also is disturbed by what he deems a rather amusing view of satellite and the issue of latency or lag time which is portrayed as not able to support interactive gaming in particular.

"I hear people say all the time that due to latency, satellite broadband is not able to perform as well as cable or DSL and is not worth considering for that reason. WildBlue can deliver speeds as fast if not faster than many DSL providers," said Maddocks. "Talk about latency. While gaming is fun and has its place, most of these same people are probably not even going to see any other form of broadband in the next five years if they are lucky, other than satellite."

One WildBlue customer on Mount Desert Island who was asked about his experience with WildBlue to date reported that while this satellite-based broadband service has not been trouble-free, under no circumstances would he return to the dial-up service he used

previously.

Next: One Rockland-based Internet service provider uses several different technologies, including wireless, to deliver broadband services.

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