



will_stapley@vnu.co.uk

Is broadband losing its core values?

Providers may be offering great prices, but Will Stapley warns that 'broadband' has a wide definition

Back in 2000, homes across the UK started to have a realistic and superior alternative to the standard 56Kbits/sec Internet connection. Broadband, we were told, would revolutionise the way we surf the net. Having to wait 30 seconds for your modem to dial up would be a thing of the past, the phone line would no longer be engaged when you were checking email, and the infuriating 56Kbits/sec maximum download speed we were all moaning about was to be given a shot in the arm.

Terms such as 'always on' and 'streaming media' were the new buzz words, and the Internet suddenly had a new and even brighter future. Indeed, with broadband availability increasing, more and more people are today enjoying all the benefits it has to offer.

Sadly, there appears to be a change in the wind, and I feel broadband is on the verge of losing its core values.

Take BT, for example. The recently launched BT Broadband Basic service has a monthly subscription cost of just £19.99. Not bad, you might think, but, as its name would suggest, there's more to it than meets the eye. Delve a little deeper into the offer and you'll find that this is a broadband service capped at just 1GB per month. What's more, this isn't just the download limit, it's what BT calls the transfer limit, which means traffic in terms of both downloading and uploading. So, in an average month, you'll have a total transfer limit of just 33MB per day to play with. Go over this limit and you'll end up paying extra fees. With the likes of service packs for Windows and frequent critical updates, you could easily find you're soon way over your limit.

Of course, this is one of the more extreme examples of capping and you can opt to pay an extra £10 for BT's uncapped service, but I fear it's the shape of things to come. In an effort to increase profit margins, ISPs may soon start to place caps on all but the most expensive of tariffs, leaving customers to fork out penalty costs when they cruise past their download limits.

The problem with the idea of placing a cap on your Internet connection is that your whole mentality changes. Even with a cap of as much as 30GB per month, you'll still be a more cautious surfer. Rather than getting the most out of broadband, you'll be trying to minimise traffic between your PC and the Internet. Before you click on a link you have to weigh up whether it will be a worthwhile use of your monthly limit. If you find you've come across a website that contains streaming video, you'll lurch forward to close down the offending browser window before too

much damage is done. Would you really want to fritter away a precious portion of your monthly limit by emailing all those photos to your relatives and, more worryingly, will you be so quick to download Microsoft's latest security update? In short, your entire online world becomes a far more restrictive place.

Some ISPs will claim they have to bring in caps to prevent customers from abusing the system. But surely the best way to handle the minority of users who transfer unacceptable amounts of data is to take these bandwidth hogs to task individually, rather than impose restrictions for everyone.

It's not just transfer caps that are damaging the reputation of broadband. While struggling to keep my eyes open on my morning commute, one advert from Tiscali on the tube stood out. 'The way broadband should be priced' was the glaring headline, with an impressive '£15.99 per month' slapped in a bubble next to it. I was thinking of ways to tell my current broadband provider exactly where to shove its overpriced service when I

noticed the small print. The exact wording is still a bit of a blur, which is a consequence of not only my weary state but also the point size of the small print, but what it amounted to was that this was a 150Kbits/sec service. I really don't think I'm in the minority when I say that the words '150Kbits/sec' and 'broadband' should never be paired.

I realise there's no law saying ISPs providing services marketed as 'broadband' have to ensure a minimum

of a 512Kbits/sec download speed, but most people have been led to understand that broadband means 512Kbits/sec or faster.

Perhaps more ominously, Tiscali has also decided to come up with a broadband offer with a 50-hours-per-month usage limit. Admittedly, the charge of 2p per minute thereafter isn't huge, but quite how you can place a timed limit on a service labelled as broadband, which is supposed to provide an 'always on' connection, is beyond me.

So what's the future for broadband pricing? If sensibly capped or sub-512Kbits/sec services are clearly promoted as such, and affordable flat-rate alternatives remain available, I won't have many complaints. But I can't help worrying that data transfer caps and other such restrictions will become commonplace – maybe even unavoidable. The 'surf as much as you like' attitude that so many of us currently enjoy may well be coming to an end, which goes completely against everything the broadband revolution stood for. I hope I'm wrong. ■

'Most people have been led to understand that broadband means 512Kbits/sec or faster'