



Small Business Tip Sheet

How to choose an internet service provider (ISP)

When choosing an ISP, small businesses need to think carefully about the quality of the service they require. ACCAN's Tip Sheet 'Preparing your organisation's Broadband Continuity Plan' provides guidance on matching the quality of IT services with the importance of these services to your business. There will always be a price/quality trade off when choosing an ISP, and most small businesses will need higher quality than the typical household or individual consumer plan offers. Many ISPs have business areas on their web sites and offer 'Business Grade' services. Carefully consider the inclusions and exclusions in these plans and match them to your business need.

The Price/Quality 'trade off'

There are hundreds of ISPs in the Australian market and monthly prices range significantly. An ISP selling a plan for \$40 with 'unlimited' data may be little different to another offering a \$100 service including 500 gigabytes, so it is worth taking the time to check your usage and budget as well as the fine print in the offer. A plan offering 'unlimited' data for a low price may be very popular, and hence could also be heavily congested where your usage will be competing with many other customers and not necessarily perform as well as a plan offering lower amounts of data at a higher price, but with service guarantees.

Service Performance

Ask your prospective ISP about the performance of their service, particularly for your location, as factors such as coverage and distance from the telephone exchange can influence actual performance for both fixed and mobile services. Coverage maps are available and it is worth checking the specific locations you and your staff commonly work from as well as the main office.

Other information such as connection speed (how long will it take to download a particular file), performance during peak periods for your business, availability ('up time') as well as how quickly will they respond to and resolve problems if you call their help desk are also important.

Ask your friends and colleagues about their experiences. You can read about other people's experiences and recommendations on websites such as [Whirlpool](#).

Look for the total cost over the whole contract

Pay attention to the information and prices next to the asterisks (often at the bottom of the ad, or in web site 'pop outs') to find out the total cost you would pay over the whole contract. Don't be distracted by headline prices.

[Australian Communications Consumer Action Network \(ACCAN\)](#)
Australia's peak telecommunications consumer advocacy organisation

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Set-up fees

Check what the set-up/installation fee is (you might also need to buy additional equipment such as a modem, router or firewall). These fees may be listed separately to the headline price.

Time to be connected

How long will it take for your new service to be connected? Does this fit with your needs?

How much data is included in the plan?

Most plans have data allowances that are measured in gigabytes (GB). Sites like [Whistle Out](#) have tools you can use to check how much data you are likely to use.

Will you be charged extra fees if you go over your data allowance?

Some ISPs charge “excess use” fees if you go over your data allowance. It’s important to check the cost of these fees as they can blow out the cost dramatically. Alternatively your ISPs may not charge you more for exceeding your data allowance, but will slow down the internet service for the rest of the billing month. If this happens, you should still be able to do the basics, like check your email, provided your general usage is still low. Larger businesses may not find this satisfactory.

Monitor how much data you use

To avoid going over your data limit, ask your ISP how to check your data usage during the month. Business grade services will generally include graphical tools showing your usage but this may not be ‘real-time’ and could be as much as a day or so behind.

What is the duration of the contract and what is the cost to cancel it early?

Most contracts are for 12 or 24 months. Some ISPs will require you to pay out the entire remaining contract months if you want to cancel your contract early. Some ISPs offer services on a “no lock-in” or “month-to-month” basis, but there will probably be higher installation and set-up charges.

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