

# OpenDNS service is an alternative to major Internet providers

April 15 2009, By Elise Ackerman

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You turn on your computer and try to log onto your favorite sites. Nothing happens. A message at the bottom of your screen tells you your computer is trying to connect, and trying and trying.

Various thoughts pass through your head, none of them comforting. "My wireless network is down." "[Google](#) is down." "The Internet is down." "Someone has hacked into my PC."

Relax. Your computer isn't broken. The Internet is still working.

Your problem most likely has to do with an obscure [software program](#) that functions as the Internet's phone book. Most people rely on their [Internet service provider](#) to connect them to the domain name system. If the software fails, they wait for the ISP to fix it.

But there is an alternative. A small San Francisco company called OpenDNS hosts a free phone book some say provides better and more reliable service than major Internet service providers. OpenDNS takes the name of a Web site, and matches it to the number of the computer where it is hosted, such as 209.203.69.2.

In addition, OpenDNS also provides a service that can make your computer more secure by filtering out dangerous Web sites.

"Everything is much faster," said Robert Drescher, an entrepreneur who changed his home network from Comcast to OpenDNS a few months

ago after he had problems connecting to the Internet.

OpenDNS features step-by-step instructions for using the service on its Web site. Users can change the settings on individual machines or on their routers.

"It's as easy as setting up voice mail," said Wesley Frye, co-director of Celebrate Oklahoma Voices, a digital storytelling project in Oklahoma.

Frye likes OpenDNS because it lets him filter out pornography sites and block phishing sites, Web sites that carry [malicious software](#) that can hurt your computer. In total, OpenDNS lets people block 50 categories of sites, in addition to specific sites.

This makes OpenDNS particularly attractive to schools and school districts, which are concerned not only about security threats but also want to limit access to sites like MySpace and Facebook. There are 25,000 schools and school districts using the service.

The La Honda-Pescadero Unified School District in California, started using the service about a year and a half ago. Adolfo Aguilar, the network administrator for the district, said video sites and gaming sites used to regularly bring down the network. With OpenDNS that hasn't been a problem.

And the price can't be beat. "Every filtering solution we ran into had a huge start-up cost to either buy the software or the hardware and then, after that, there was a yearly subscription fee," Aguilar said.

OpenDNS's free service is supported by surprisingly lucrative advertising. When Web sites go down, instead of showing the standard error page, OpenDNS shows a page with search results and search ads that are provided by Yahoo. The ads are the company's only source of

revenue.

David Ulevitch, OpenDNS's founder and chief technology officer, said the ads are effective because, like search, they are targeted to what a person is looking for at a particular moment.

Indeed, Ulevitch, 27, believes he has found one of the Internet's sweet spots -- an unexploited business opportunity that makes money and makes people's lives better. A domain-name system geek, this is Ulevitch's second DNS company. He started his first, EveryDNS.net, in his dorm room at Washington University in St. Louis. Ulevitch received \$2 million in funding from Halsey Minor, founder of CNet Networks, to found OpenDNS in late 2005.

Ulevitch said the company is profitable.

OpenDNS works, Ulevitch said, because DNS software tends to get minimal attention from big Internet service providers until something goes wrong. In contrast, OpenDNS focuses obsessively on the domain name system. Ulevitch bragged his service has never gone down and said by the end of 2009 he will have expanded from seven to 14 data centers around the world.

"We design for failure," Ulevitch said. "We can take an entire data center offline and nobody would notice."

The snafus of other service providers are one of the key drivers of OpenDNS's growth. The service has 10 million users who submit about 10 billion DNS queries a day, and the World Wide Web is littered with sites recommending OpenDNS as a solution whenever there is a major outage.

In December, OpenDNS got a particularly big boost after 1.2 million

subscribers to Time Warner Cable found themselves unable to access the Internet. The Los Angeles Times posted a link to the site on its technology blog. In February, Computerworld recommended OpenDNS as a defense against the Conficker worm.

If you do decide to try OpenDNS, it's important to follow the directions on the Web site exactly and not to change any other settings on your computer or your [router](#). It's easy to use but requires precise instructions.

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