

Google's uberfast plan bound to include fine print

February 18 2010, By Brier Dudley

Google is acting like Willy Wonka, dangling a few golden tickets to ultrafast broadband around the country. Cities are salivating at the chance to have the amazing, mysterious search company build one of the networks they've been craving.

I'll bet Seattle -- one of the first to pounce -- has a good chance of getting a piece of the action.

It is on the Internet arterials needed to handle Google's 1 gigabit-per-second service, Google has a cluster of top network specialists working here, and Seattle proper has surprisingly poor options for [Internet service](#).

Topping it off, Seattle is "shovel-ready."

Since 2004, Seattle has inventoried its network resources and drawn up plans for a fiber network connecting homes and businesses, piggybacking on its municipal fiber.

A 2007 city study said a citywide fiber network would cost up to \$478 million and break even within 18 years. It would cost an average of \$292 to connect each house with overhead wires, or \$615 with underground wires, plus \$613 for a special cable box.

That's for a 15 to 100 megabit-per-second network.

It's exciting to think about what could be done with Google's 1-gig service.

But don't forget: Wonka's ticket winners had to sign an enormous contract with fine print only he could understand, including the notorious Section 37-B.

Google is not providing any real details yet, but here are a few clauses to think about:

- Only a tiny fraction of the population would get the service. Google said its experiment will reach 50,000 to 500,000 people. That's between 0.016 and 0.16 percent of the United States. You have a better chance of winning \$30 in the Lotto than getting Google [broadband](#).
- How will "Gband" affect everyone else's Internet service? Could it affect service similar to the way Apple's iPhone bogged down AT&T's wireless network?

A Qwest spokeswoman wouldn't comment specifically on Google, but she noted Qwest is upgrading its national Internet backbone from 40 gigabits per second to 100 gigabits per second.

Google is talking about connecting 500,000 homes and businesses with 1 gigabit-per-second service. Imagine what would happen if they all tried to stream and share the 2011 "American Idol" finale in high-def 3-D at once.

- Google may prod Qwest, Comcast, Verizon and others to offer faster service.

But an arms race to offer crazy-fast service may exacerbate what I think is the new digital divide in the United States -- between those with poor

Internet access and those with fast service that can handle the latest applications.

If telecommunications companies divert resources to build ultrafast showcase projects reaching only a few customers, it will take longer to improve the companies' broader networks reaching more people.

Google's network also may give the false impression that ultrafast service has "arrived." But you can buy 1 gig service from Qwest today, if you're Bill Gates.

Will cities with a pocket of Gband still try building public networks?
Will phone companies delay building out cities that have pockets of Google service?

- Cities have valuable resources that Google needs to use to test its future products. Will cities give up leverage -- and public assets -- in their rush to lure Google? Networks use public real estate along rights of way. They may also need repeater stations with generators, possibly in residential areas and parks. Google's network could be a great offer to cities, but it won't be free to cities or end-users.
- Google's minimalist approach to customer service may not work with residential broadband. It hasn't worked well with Google's Nexus One mobile phone, which it's trying to sell and service by itself through the Web. Will cities be on the hook to provide live customer service and field support?
- A Google spokesman told me the company won't provide phone or video service, only Internet access. Instead it will let other companies sell those services on the networks. This avoids the sticky problem of getting TV and phone franchises from cities. But does that mean you'll still have to subscribe to Comcast as well?

Then there's Section 37-B, which pertains to privacy.

Google's business is selling targeted ads. The more it knows about you, the more money it can make on ads you see. It can't help but seek and use as much information as you'll provide.

You can't use its latest phone without signing in to a Google account. Its new Buzz social-networking service was set to automatically publicly share contacts, until the search engine made an opt-out more transparent after a backlash over privacy concerns.

Imagine what Google could do with the information it gathers from the broadband pipe into your home or business.

I asked Google whether its broadband will require any sort of Google account, logon or software on your PC at home. Its response:

"We intend to offer users a robust set of choices about their use of this and other Google services. It's difficult to comment on specific details today, but as our project progresses, we'll be investigating ways to give consumers the choice to access our service through OpenID and other options."

With all its talk about openness, I'm hoping [Google](#) and other cities will talk through these issues publicly. And get that 1 gig service to my neighborhood soon.

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