

'Up to' claims for Internet connection speeds next to worthless

March 2 2010, By David Lazarus

When it comes to high-speed Internet access, are you getting what you pay for?

Venice, Calif., resident Mike Mlikotin wanted to know what he was really being offered after [Verizon Communications](#) Inc. included a pitch for its broadband service in his most recent phone bill.

It said that Mlikotin, 75, could lock in a lifetime rate of as low as \$19.99 a month for an online speed of up to 1 megabit per second -- not the fastest clip you'll find on the Net, but plenty fast for most people.

At that speed, it would take just a few seconds to download the equivalent of a short novel.

"It seemed like a very good deal," Mlikotin told me. "No more rate increases -- ever. I liked the sound of that."

But when Mlikotin called Verizon about the offer, he wanted a little clarification about that "up to 1 megabit per second" rate.

"If that's as much as it can be," he asked, "what's the usual speed?"

Apparently that's not a question Verizon is comfortable answering. And neither are most other Internet service providers, which routinely promise speeds "up to" certain cyber-velocities but have a hard time specifying what most customers can really expect.

"Truth in broadband advertising is a giant problem in the United States," said Joel Kelsey, a telecom policy analyst for Consumers Union. "These 'up to' speeds are not what the typical customer experiences."

A more straightforward sales pitch would feature the average speed that Internet customers experience in a certain area, he said. Many business customers are provided such information by telecom companies, Kelsey said, and some are even guaranteed minimum access speeds.

"Ordinary customers never receive such offers," he said. "They're simply promised the 'up to' speed."

Mlikotin said that when he asked a Verizon service rep what his actual speed might be, the rep danced around the subject without ever providing a rough approximation of what he could expect under ordinary conditions.

"It seemed very strange that they wouldn't just answer the question," he said.

Maybe that's because the answer Verizon would have to give, if it wanted to be completely truthful, would pretty much undermine its blazing-fast sales pitch.

The Federal Communication Commission determined in a recent report that "actual broadband speeds lag advertised speeds by as much as 50 percent to 80 percent," particularly at peak usage times from 7 to 10 p.m.

Think about that. At least half the time you're online, and in some cases as much as 80 percent of the time, you're not getting the superfast speed that was prominently featured in ads for the service.

In fact, in its most recent overview of Internet activity, network specialist Akamai Technologies Inc. said that the average U.S. broadband speed declined 2.4 percent in the third quarter of last year compared with a year earlier.

The average U.S. broadband speed is only about a quarter of what South Koreans enjoy, Akamai found, and places us well behind the likes of Japan, Hong Kong, Sweden, Ireland -- even Romania and the Czech Republic.

In a global smackdown of broadband speeds, the United States ranks a sluggish 18th.

Telecom companies say that an individual customer's broadband speed will depend on a variety of factors, including network congestion and how far the customer may be located from a data hub.

"Unfortunately, with millions of potential customers and hundreds of thousands of miles of network infrastructure, it would be impractical for us to check the length of every potential line in advance of selling the service," said Jon Davies, a Verizon spokesman.

Kelsey at Consumers Union responded that this just makes it more important for providers to inform people about average speeds in specific areas, rather than the pie-in-the-sky "up to" speed.

As it stands, most people won't know their actual online speed until the service is up and running and they visit one of the numerous Web sites that provide free tests (such as Speedtest.net).

"But you can do that only after you sign up for a service," Kelsey said. "You shouldn't have to do this by trial and error."

The FCC agrees. Peter Bowen, an agency official who is helping draft a National Broadband Plan, told me one possible change could be to require Internet service providers to post average access speeds just like carmakers post average miles per gallon.

"This is something we take very seriously," he said. "Consumers need the actual miles per gallon for broadband, not a maximum."

The FCC's [broadband](#) plan is expected to be unveiled March 17.

Oh, and about that lifetime monthly price that Verizon is offering: Verizon says you can lock in a rate of \$19.99 for a per-second speed of up to 1 megabit, \$29.99 for up to 3 megabits, or \$39.99 for up to 7.1 megabits.

But Davies said there are a few caveats to keep in mind. First, you have to already be a phone customer and have to agree to a minimum two-year contract to receive a lifetime deal.

Second, you can't make any changes to your service plan from that point on if you want to maintain the lifetime rate.

Third, Verizon might still pull the plug at any time.

"A customer can lock in the lifetime rate for as long as we offer the service," Davies said.

They just don't make lifetime warranties like they used to.

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