

4G devices, networks multiply

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Consumers should soon have a wide range of new, speedier and more accessible ways of connecting to the Internet wirelessly.

At the <u>Consumer Electronics Show</u> this week, the major <u>wireless carriers</u> announced plans to build out and ramp up their high-speed data networks and showed off new devices for accessing them. The so-called <u>4G</u> wireless services are expected to deliver data at rates five or more times faster than current network speeds.

The faster networks are needed, given how overloaded current networks are, said Ken Dulaney, an analyst who covers the wireless industry for the research group Gartner. They'll allow users "to get more done in a shorter period of time and get more users on (the networks)," he said.

And <u>consumers</u> will have their choice of high-speed networks. Verizon said it will expand its high-speed LTE network, already available in about 35 metro areas, to 140 new cities by the end of this year. AT&T announced plans to launch its own LTE network by the middle of this year.

Meanwhile, T-Mobile said it is now offering its own high-speed network, using a different technology, in 100 markets nationwide and plans to double the peak speed of that network by the middle of the year. And Sprint, which is building its own new high-speed data service, announced three new, compatible devices, including a version of Research In Motion's upcoming PlayBook tablet computer.



Wireless data use has been growing rapidly, thanks to smart phones such as Apple's iPhone that allow consumers to access the Web and online services much more easily than previous devices. Cisco Systems and other equipment makers have projected that the amount of wireless data will double every year over the next several years as more consumers, using more devices such as tablets and e-readers, connect to the Internet wirelessly.

Some carriers have struggled to keep up with the explosion in data usage. AT&T in particularly has been roundly criticized for access problems experienced by customers in New York, San Francisco and other cities. The new data networks are expected to solve some congestion issues by increasing the bandwidth available and more efficiently sharing it. Industry insiders and analysts expect the new higher-speed data rates to create new uses, such as connecting cars and home security systems to the Internet. They could also allow paramedics to transmit video from an accident site.

"(CES) is a good time to get people starting to think about what they can do with ubiquitous, high-quality bandwidth," Dulaney said.

That said, the new high-speed <u>data networks</u> may not solve all the current problems and may lead to some of their own. Cisco has said it expects bandwidth-hogging video data to comprise 90 percent of Internet traffic by 2013. Similar trends could hold true on mobile devices, thanks to the rise in videoconferencing on such services as Skype and Apple's FaceTime application.

"We could end up saturating the networks pretty quickly here," Dulaney said.

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