

Why Broadband?

One of the most frequently-asked questions is how do I subscribe to faster Internet service for my office? This question isn't answered in one or two sentences, as this newsletter will explain.

"Broadband Internet service will become the principal media for commercial communication within this coming decade."

Dave Murphy (1994)

*Damar Group, Ltd.
PMB 451
6030-M Marshalee Dr
Elkridge, MD 21075
410.290.7000
1.888.290.6200
603.925.1110 (fax)
info@dgl.com
dgl.com*

Commercial Broadband: A Digital Safari

Executive Overview

If your company is wired to the Internet via a broadband connection and you're happy with the service you receive, count yourself lucky, and count yourself in the minority.

Business owners who have sought to convert from dial-up Internet service to always-on broadband Internet service are learning that the conversion process isn't for the faint at heart. Why is this? I'll admit that I don't know, but I can offer a few paths for you to take through the broadband jungle. But first, you need to evaluate if it's worth going on a broadband safari.

What is broadband?

Before getting mired in the details, let's start with a definition of broadband. Broadband is high-speed access to data. It's not limited to Internet service as broadband may also include access to other digital resources such as virtual private networks or direct access to satellite offices. However, in general usage, the word broadband means fast digital Internet service. And in this article, I'll use broadband in its common

definition: fast access to the net for e-mail, Web surfing, file downloads, video conferencing, and virtual private networking.

Broadband is all about fast communication of data. OK, so what are data? If you think they're information, think again. I don't let my graduate students leave any of their e-business classes unless they can differentiate data and information. So what do you think the two are? Take a moment to stop reading and write down your definition of data and of information. Go ahead, get a piece of paper and a pencil...STOP READING and write down your definitions of data and information.

Do you have your definitions written? Good. Now read on...Data are facts, especially those organized for analysis or used to reason or form decisions. Data can be converted to information by the human brain when they are evaluated, compared, or analyzed. Data are facts, figures, and records. Information is assessments and evaluations of data.

Why make this distinction? It's important to realize that broadband isn't an all-purpose savior; it's not a source of information, it's only medium

for faster access to data. If you think broadband access will increase the amount of information you receive, think again. All broadband will do is increase the speed at which data comes to you. It's still up to you to process the data into information. Sure, you'll be able download files faster, send and receive e-mail faster, and surf from one Web page to another in the blink of an eye, but it's up to you to use these data resources appropriately.

What's the commercial value of broadband?

This question isn't nearly as difficult to answer as it first may appear. It's as simple as asking three questions:

1. How do my clients prefer to communicate with me?
2. How could I improve communication with my vendors and suppliers?
3. How should I change the way my employees communicate with one another and with me?

Let's take the questions one at a time. How do my clients prefer to communicate with me? To answer this question, you'll have to survey your clients. Don't assume that just because they call you on the phone that they prefer to talk to you. They may be

calling you because you haven't given them an alternative. Some of your clients may prefer to e-mail you or write you digitally-signed correspondence that's uploaded to your Web site. They may even prefer to video conference with you rather than meeting in person. But until you ask them what they prefer, you'll never know if you're serving them as they want to be served.

Question number two is all about how you want to be served. Maintaining a vendor relationship is all about maximizing profit and minimizing effort. Is the manner in which you deal with your vendors and suppliers easy for you? For example, I used to hand write an itemized purchase order using a form one of our hardware vendors supplied us. The process of ordering the components for a single computer often required an hour's labor. I asked if I could submit my order as an Excel spreadsheet or through a form on the vendor's Web site. They changed their order entry process to accommodate our Excel spreadsheets, and now an order can be submitted in less than three minutes. This saves me almost a full hour to apply to other money-making tasks.

The third question is, I think, the most important. Are your employees in constant and simple communication with one another? Can they transmit documents to one another with a few mouse

clicks? Are they able to video conference with one another across town or across the globe? The first rule of warfare is to disrupt your enemy's lines of communication. Are you disrupting your own lines of communication by not encouraging employees to communicate?

Why is broadband so difficult to come by?

Residential broadband service is likely to be available through your cable TV or telephone service providers. All you have to do is place a single phone call to order the service. However, commercial offices don't seem to have it so easy, and the reason seems to be money.

The three primary broadband choices for commercial spaces are: DSL (Digital Subscriber Line), dedicated digital service (such as a T-1 line), and digital cable service (just like residential TV cable). However, one or more of these services may not be available to your office because you're too far from the telephone central office, on the other side of the river, in a low area, up on the hill, not in a subscriber zone, or any of a number of other reasons. All of which seem to be polite covers for "sorry, but we won't make enough profit from your account to run the lines to your location."

In selecting a broadband provider, you'll probably have to do a bit of research and hold tightly to your lucky rabbit's foot. Start by contact-

ing your telephone service provider. If they offer broadband service for what you consider a reasonable fee, then you'll have the convenience and security of having only one vendor for your telecommunication service. If either they tell you that it's not possible to have broadband service at your site, don't assume they're correct, what they really mean to say is only "We don't provide broadband service at your site." This is where it starts to get interesting. All businesses that I've helped with their broadband connections have either simply contracted for service from their telephone provider or interviewed multiple broadband providers. Those who have had to interview providers have often considered more than a dozen alternative vendors, each of whom offers slightly different service and pricing schedules, so we're often left comparing apples and oranges.

The secret to interviewing broadband providers seems to be in knowing what you need and expect and a ballpark estimate of what you're willing to pay for service. It's not enough to want just broadband service for less than a hundred dollars a month. In consultation with your IT staff or computer advisor, you must know how much bandwidth you need. Do you need a full 1.5Mb per second download link or will 384kb per second suffice? What upload speed do you require? Will you need

Web hosting and e-mail service or have you already contracted that to another vendor? Before you open the local business directory to interview broadband providers, take an hour to meet with your technical staff and make sure you know exactly what service you need. Then go shopping.

One last thought.

You've probably already been told to keep your antivirus software updated each week, but did you know that with always-on broadband service you'll also need a firewall? Firewalls prevent hackers from accessing your computer network from the Internet. There are two excellent alternatives, each for less than a hundred dollars; one is a hardware box, the other is a software application. Although you must have a firewall if you have a broadband connection, you should also have one even if you're using a dial-up modem connection--whenever you're connected, your computer is accessible to anyone on the Internet. Call me and we'll talk about how you can best secure your computer.

Dave Murphy is president of Damar Group, Ltd., an e-business advisory group headquartered on the East Coast and a member of the faculty at the University of Phoenix. He can be reached at 1.888.290.6200 or dave@dgl.com.