

Last Mile Broadband: Trials and Tribulations of Implementing the Plan

Michael J. Ackerman, Ph.D.*

I'm sure that you see and hear the daily advertisements for Internet service via DSL or cable modem. You may also have heard the uncomplimentary stories about the quality of these services. In a previous column (Vol 17, No. 6, pages 295–296), I discussed my experience trying to obtain DSL service. I described how the service wasn't available to my location despite the postcards and annoying telephone solicitations I received at that location. I finally succeeded in finding a company that would provide me with home asynchronous DSL service.

Because I already had an Internet address, the company agreed to keep me informed of the progress of my order by e-mail. It would take two weeks for the modem, software, and installation instructions to be delivered by mail. The DSL connection would be activated within the same two weeks. Billing would not start until my first successful login. If I had any problems, a customer service representative could be reached at the toll-free number that was provided to me.

Three days later, I received an e-mail that my DSL connection had been activated. But three weeks later, I had not yet received my modem. I called customer service. A voice recording told me how important my call was but that it would be at least 30 minutes before I could speak to a representative. What happened to that short wait that I experienced when I ordered the DSL service? That was a different toll free number. I hung up and dialed the other number. A real person answered almost immediately. I explained my problem and was told that I needed to talk to customer service and that I would be connected immediately. I was connected immediately to the customer service line, but a familiar voice told me that although my call was very important it would be at least 30 minutes before I could talk to a representative. Fortunately I have a speaker phone, so I found something else to do while I listened to the company-provided background music. I soon discovered that the music repeated itself about every five minutes. When I finally got through, I was told that my DSL modem was back ordered and should arrive in approximately two weeks.

Miracle of miracles! My modem arrived just three days later. And so did a bill for the past month of service. But I had not yet completed a successful login. A call, with the traditional wait time, to customer service corrected this oversight.

... in each city, most communications companies contract with a DSL-providing company.

Back to getting the DSL connection up and running: I unpacked the modem, hooked it up following the enclosed directions, loaded the software, and it didn't work! This is hard for an Internet consultant to understand. The modem reported that a DSL signal was present. The

computer reported that the software was loaded properly and that the DSL modem was connected and functioning properly. But it still didn't work. So, this time I called Technical Support, waited the traditional 40 or so minutes, heard the same music at least eight times, and then talked to a Technical Support representative.

The good news was that this person clearly knew what he was talking about. He asked me to run certain programs on my computer to verify that my hardware and software were installed properly. From his computer, he verified that my DSL line was activated. The problem, he concluded, was that the DSL signal reaching my DSL modem was present but that the signal was not strong enough for the modem to lock on to it. He would ask someone at my telephone central office to make some adjustments in the morning. He then explained how to read the modem lights so that I would know when the problem was corrected. He gave me his name, his direct toll-free number, and the hours that he was on duty so that I could get back to him for a progress report or to tell him that all was well. Now I was really impressed.

He also gave me some insight into the DSL business that I was not aware of. He asked me who my DSL provider was. I was a bit confused because the recorded voice that answered the phone stated that I had reached my DSL service provider's Technical Support line. So the friendly and knowledgeable technician explained that although the communications company that I signed up with would provide me with an e-mail account and send me the bill each month, in each city, most communications companies contract with a DSL-providing company.

He looked up my location and declared that I was lucky because my secret provider was one of the most reliable in the business. He also hinted that the company that he worked for provided technical support for many of the communications companies and actual DSL providers.

[When DSL works, it is very impressive. But don't throw away your 56K modem.](#)

The next evening, the modem lights indicated that everything was working properly. So I tried the computer and received instant success. But then it stopped. The modem lights indicated that the old problem was back. No problem, I had the direct phone number of my very own tech support person. I called and was connected within a minute. The tech said that he would have to run some tests and would call me back. Within a half hour, he called back to tell me that he was sorry but they were not sure what the problem was. I looked at the modem lights only to discover that the connection was working again.

The next day, the same thing happened. I called my technician who was pleasant, ran some additional tests, and called me back. But this time I noticed that the DSL circuit started to work as soon as the phone rang on the telephone line associated with the DSL circuit. The tech said that he didn't understand this but was happy to hear that the DSL circuit was working. The next time the DSL circuit stopped working, I called the phone number of the telephone line associated with the DSL circuit. As soon as the phone rang, the DSL circuit started working again. I now had what engineers call the work-around.

Although I now could keep my DSL line running, I did not consider it to be an acceptable solution. I called customer service to see if I could cancel the service. If the circuit did not work at all, I was told, then I could cancel my one-year contract. However, because the circuit worked, even if it was intermittent, I could not cancel. If I kept track of DSL availability, however, I could call each month and request a credit.

Read your contract and watch your billing.

So what advice can a consultant offer? When DSL works, it is very impressive. But don't throw away your 56K modem. Read your contract and watch your billing. Be sure that your DSL vendor includes a large number of free dial-up hours as part of your DSL package, and be sure that the DSL line is associated with a telephone line that is heavily used. That way, it will be continually reset, and you will not have to remember to call that line several times a week. n