



Selecting an ISP

The internet has transformed business - but whether you are selling goods through an e-commerce site, providing an online-based service yourself, or simply sending emails and browsing the web, the benefits your business can derive from the internet are heavily affected by your choice of Internet Service Provider (ISP).

Your ISP is the company providing the link that connects you to the internet. An ISP provides a technical service which, when all is well, should be invisible to you and your team: you don't need to know exactly what it is doing or how it's doing it, just as you don't need to think about power stations and transmission lines to be confident that the electricity will work when you flick a switch.

However, if all is *not* well with your ISP, it can prove a painful obstacle to your use of the internet. So it's important to make the right choice in the first place, and that's what this guide focuses on.

45% of people in the EU would change ISP if necessary to get a faster Internet connection. (Source: EC)

Overview of ISPs

It's true that if you send an email to John, he will receive exactly the same email regardless of which ISP you used. In that respect, all ISPs do provide the same basic service.

However, there are big differences in the quality of the service (for example, its speed and reliability), in customer support, and in extra features like website hosting. So, although you can indeed connect to the whole internet through any ISP, they are certainly not all the same.

Different kinds of ISP

Some ISPs, usually the smaller ones, have internet service provision as their only business. An advantage of these is, typically, very personal service; for example, if you have a technical problem, you may well end up speaking to the engineer whose job it is to actually fix it, rather than to a call centre.

The downside of these small specialist ISPs, however, is that they may not have the vast resources of the larger companies.

Other, larger, ISPs include telephone companies (both fixed-line and mobile) and television companies.



What Should I Look For In An ISP?

The price differences among the kind of ISPs likely to appeal to smaller businesses are relatively insignificant. The services offered, and the level of service promised, are much more important.

Exactly what you require of the ISP depends, of course, on how you plan to use the internet. You may need to consider the following factors:

Domains

Will the ISP host your domain (e.g. yourcompany.co.uk), by making your website visible to the outside world, and handling email traffic for all the addresses you have at that domain? Will you need it to register other domains? What are the charges for hosting and registration?

Email

Whether your email addresses use your own domain (john@yourcompany.co.uk) or the ISP's (john@yourcompany.yourisp.co.uk), are there limits on the number you can have? How easy is it to add new ones, change passwords, and so on?

Can you access email through a web interface, for example when you are on a public computer?

Note that if you are already using a web-based email provider such as Gmail or Outlook.com, you can carry on using them without making any changes.

Web hosting

If you have a website, does it call for any particular services from the ISP beyond the simple hosting of pages? For example, you might need support for an online database, or a payments system.

This is one of the areas where ISPs differ most, and if your requirements are complex that may significantly limit your choice of ISPs (as well as increasing your costs). The people who developed or currently manage your website should be able to advise you on exactly what's needed. It's crucial to get it exactly right, or your website won't work.

Support

What kind of support does your ISP offer if something does go wrong? Can you get in touch with someone after working hours, or at the weekend? Is there a free number to call? How long do customers typically spend waiting for a call to be answered? Can you get technical and account questions answered online too? If hardware supplied to you by the ISP goes wrong, how quickly will they replace it?

Bandwidth (speed)

Many ISPs heavily publicise the 'bandwidth' that they provide - essentially, the speed of your Internet connection. This is measured in megabits per second, often abbreviated to Mbps.

Higher bandwidth means files get sent and received quicker, web pages load faster, and so on (although there are also factors other than bandwidth, and beyond the ISP's control, which can affect performance both positively and negatively).



How important bandwidth actually is to you depends on how you plan to use the internet. If you are mostly just sending emails and reading web pages, it's not a major factor these days; any ISP will provide sufficient bandwidth for those activities.

However, if you are using online video a lot or sending and receiving large files, it can become a significant issue. And even if you are not doing that today, you may very well be doing so in the future.

More and more business activities are moving to multimedia online environments (think of how web-based video conferences are replacing physical meetings, for example). At the same time, nearly every business is generating more digital data. These factors mean that your bandwidth requirements will almost inevitably increase.

The latest generation of broadband, known as Superfast Broadband, is defined as offering speeds of 25Mbps or above - sometimes much more. If you can get this in your area and it won't break the bank, it's well worth the investment.

More about bandwidth

It's worth remembering that the figures quoted for bandwidth in ISPs' promotional material are usually best-case scenarios, and true day-to-day performance may not be as good. In fact, a study has found that the typical figure could be as low as 45% of that promised, although rules on ISP advertising have changed since that study was conducted. So ask a prospective ISP what bandwidth customers really get on average.

Some ISPs impose limits on the amount of data you can upload or download in a given time period. Be careful that these are significantly above your expected use.

If you plan to upload (send) as well as download (receive) a lot of large files, it's also worth noting that the bandwidth available for uploading may well be much less than that for downloading. Again, ask for real-life figures.

And if bandwidth is important to you, you can also enquire about the ISP's 'contention ratio' - the number of customers who have to simultaneously share a single channel to connect to the internet. Lower numbers are better; the average for business packages is around 20:1.

Finally, remember that the bandwidth provided to customers can vary across different parts of the country, and may be partly dependent on the telephone infrastructure in your area. This is beyond the individual ISP's control, but they should be able to tell you what's available in your locality.

Service levels

All ISPs occasionally have problems making their service temporarily unavailable. You should ask a prospective provider how often this happens to them by enquiring about their 'uptime' - the percentage of time that the service is working properly. This should be around 99.9%.



Security

Does your ISP filter out spam and other undesirable email, and if so, how effectively? Does it provide you with any controls over how your internet connection is used, for example to prevent staff looking at inappropriate websites? How easy and flexible are the management tools for these measures?

Pricing packages

As we've said, the actual costs of ISPs for smaller businesses don't differ so vastly that price should be a prime consideration. However, it's worth investigating exactly how you will be charged - for example, how frequent the billing cycle is - and whether there are any hidden costs, especially up-front costs for hardware.

If you happen to be looking for a mobile or fixed-line telephone provider, or a TV service provider, at the same time as you're choosing an ISP, there are many packages available which combine internet access with these services.

Moving there and moving on

How easy is it to get up and running with an ISP, and how long does it take? The technical aspects should be pain-free - usually, the ISP just needs to send you a box called a router which plugs into your computer or network, and then into the telephone line.

However, there can be complexities and delays if you need to transfer domain names to a new ISP, and it's worth checking that they'll handle all the admin for you.

Similarly, just in case things go wrong with your ISP and you want to move to another in the future, it's worth making sure that this can be done with a minimum of aggravation, and that you're not tied into an excessively long-term contract.

Choosing An ISP

Defining your needs

The list above of factors to consider in an ISP might seem daunting, but some may be irrelevant to you. For example, if you don't accept payments from customers online and don't plan to, it doesn't matter whether or not a particular ISP provides that service.

So it's vital to establish clearly how your business uses the Internet today, and how you're likely to use it in the near future - over the next two years, say.

If you have a network administrator or IT specialists they should be able to provide you with actual hard figures on current usage (for example, how upload requirements compare to download requirements). Otherwise, an informal survey of staff may be useful.

To avoid getting bogged down in minutiae, it can be a good idea to decide what your top three or four criteria are from the list above. This will help you assemble a shortlist of ISPs that meet your needs, and you can then filter them further using the less important factors.



Finding information and recommendations

There are numerous resources available online to help you choose an ISP, such as discussion boards where people share their experiences. However, it's worth noting that this is a quite rapidly-changing market, and reviews or reports from a few years ago may not reflect the current reality.

Recommendations from other businesses in your region are often the best ways to identify suitable ISPs, so ask around. But remember that your criteria may differ from theirs, so there is still no substitute for closely examining the details of services described by each ISP on their website, and requesting further information where necessary.

You can also use the links below to get more information about the ISP market in general, and particular providers.

Top Tips

Remember your internet use and bandwidth requirements will probably increase

Ensure that any agreement you set up with an ISP is capable of meeting your needs now AND in the future.

Take performance figures with a pinch of salt

Recognise that the figures quoted by an ISP are usually best-case scenarios, so don't be afraid to ask what bandwidth customers really get on average.

Don't select an ISP on price alone

Consider what your business could lose if a cheap, but low-quality, ISP left you without an internet connection for 24 hours.

Watch out for usage limits

Some ISPs may impose limits on the amount of data you can upload or download in a given time period, so ensure that these are significantly above your expected usage levels if you plan to go with such as ISP.

Don't be dazzled by uptime numbers.

99% uptime may sound great - but actually means nearly four days of unavailability every year! Ideally you should be looking for even closer to 100% uptime.

Focus on your current and anticipated needs

Don't get distracted by irrelevant features.

Don't assume big brands are best

Big isn't necessarily beautiful, particularly if a smaller (and perhaps more local) ISP is able to offer a more personalised and responsive service.