

Comcast Cuts Off Bandwidth Hogs

The telecom giant is warning customers to avoid excessive bandwidth consumption or risk being disconnected for up to a year.

Man your PCs. The bandwidth hogs are revolting and Comcast is the recipient of their virtual torches and pitchforks.

Customers across the country have been contacted by the telecom giant with a warning to curb excessive bandwidth consumption or risk a one-year service termination. Comcast, however, is refusing to reveal how much bandwidth use is allowed, making it impossible for customers to know if they are in danger of violating Comcast's limit.

The move has driven customers to sign up with other service providers.

"Comcast and I are not on speaking terms," said Frank Carreiro, a West Jordan, Utah resident who had his Internet service terminated by Comcast in January.

Carreiro said he received a message from a Comcast Security Assurance representative in December, who warned him that he was hogging too much of the company's bandwidth and needed to cut down. When Carreiro contacted customer service about the call, they had no idea what he was talking about and suggested it was a prank phone call. Unconvinced, Carreiro contacted Comcast several more times, but was again told there was no problem.

A month later, he woke up to a dead Internet connection. Customer service directed him to the Security Assurance division, which Carreiro said informed him he would now be without service for one year.

Carreiro said he told Security Assurance that customer service had cleared him of any wrongdoing, but Security Assurance reportedly told him that customer service is not kept abreast of bandwidth issues for security purposes. Comcast also refused to tell Carreiro how much bandwidth he would have been allowed to use to avoid service termination.

"It was a very frustrating experience," he said.

Carreiro has since switched to DSL service from Qwest, which became available in his neighborhood in late February. Again connected to the Web, he has taken his fight to the blogosphere with an online journal (<http://comcastissue.blogspot.com>) detailing his troubles.

Admitted "Internet junkie" and Chattanooga resident Cameron Smith also had his service cut off in January for one year. "They said there wasn't a limit - for downloading - but that I was downloading too much, about 550 gigs. I backed off to about 450 gigs, but they still suspended us."

Smith has since switched to DSL service from BellSouth AT&T. "I don't like it," he said, but it is the only other high-speed option available in Chattanooga and he refuses to ever return to Comcast again.

Smith also pondered the possibility of a class-action lawsuit against Comcast, but has been delayed by funding issues. "If I could afford it, then I would do it in a heartbeat because it's a bait-and-switch with their customer service," he said.

As of press time, repeated calls to Comcast were not returned, nor were messages left for Comcast Security Assurance or e-mails sent to that department's manager, Jay Opperman.

In a February statement regarding Carreiro's case, Comcast said that "customers who are notified of excessive usage typically consume more than 100 times the average national Comcast bandwidth usage" and apologized for "for any miscommunication that this customer may have received about this process."

What About the Others?

Several other top U.S. service providers admitted to monitoring network traffic and contacting bandwidth hogs, though none were aware of any customers who had actually been denied service.

"We do not disconnect customers," said Mark Harrad, senior vice president of corporate communications at Time Warner Cable. But the company does "employ various network-management tools to ensure excessively high users are not allowed to degrade the online experience of other customers."

Harrad said that "excessive use varies" depending on whether it is a peak traffic period, how many "top talkers" are online at the same time and what is occurring with regular network traffic patterns. "It is not so much an issue of exceeding a speed limit as a pattern of behavior over time," he maintained.

At Verizon, "it is in our terms and conditions that you cannot generate excessive amounts of Internet traffic and you cannot host any kind of server," said Bobbi Henson, director of media relations.

But Verizon does not have any "set measurements" on how much is too much, Henson said. "We look at it in the aggregate. We will monitor - the network - and if we see an issue, we'll try to rebalance the traffic before pulling a customer's service."

Henson is not aware of any incidents when Verizon has had to notify a customer about excessive use or cancel their service because of bandwidth issues.

Cox Communications provides data on its Web site (www.cox.com/policy/limitations.asp) about how much bandwidth a user is allowed to use under the company's three service plans.

"Cox does not spend a large amount of time enforcing byte caps, however, we do communicate with customers when their usage is so egregious as to impact the performance of the network for others," said David Grabert, director of media relations.

Having clear guidelines posted online "makes for fair and clear dialogue when issues arise," Grabert said.

Blame Video

Across the country, consumers are spending a significant amount of their time online viewing video content, according to a March report from the Consumer Electronics Association (CEA) that examined what users are doing with their bandwidth.

Of the more than 2,000 adults CEA surveyed in late 2006 and early 2007, researchers found that 70 percent were accessing content via online streams. Of that 70 percent, 49 percent connected to the Web for news content, 33 percent went online for movie downloads and 28 percent were gaming, the report said.

"Some of these people who are bandwidth hogs are - Comcast's - best broadband customers," said Adam Thierer, director of the Center for Digital Media Freedom at D.C. think tank Progress & Freedom Foundation. By angering this base, "you're just given your competitors a way to step in" and steal customers.

"What mystifies me is why no one is willing to propose tiered pricing" for broadband, he said. "Obviously, one potential reason is that it is wildly unpopular with people. There is something about the all-you-can-eat, buffet-style pricing that people just love. I think with broadband, we've just already become accustomed to

the idea that it should be offered at a flat rate."

Update: Comcast sent us the following response soon after this article was published:

"More than 99.99% of our customers use the residential high-speed Internet service as intended, which includes downloading and sharing video, photos and other rich-media. Comcast has a responsibility to provide these customers with a superior experience, and to address any excessive or abusive activities usage issues that may adversely impact that experience."

"The customers who are notified of excessive use typically and repeatedly consume exponentially more bandwidth than an average residential user, which would include, for example, the equivalent of sending 256,000 photos a month, or sending 13 million e-mails every month (or 18,000 emails every hour, every day, all month). In these rare instances, Comcast's policy is to proactively contact the customer via phone to work with them and address the issue or help them select a more appropriate commercial-grade Comcast product."

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