The RoadRunner Saga (Where Was the Coyote When I Needed Him?)

High speed online access is the holy grail of any self respecting internet junkie, and this writer is no exception. The moment the first ad appeared for Time Warner's RoadRunner cable modem service, which promises speed that is exponentially greater than theoretical 56K modem speed (56,000 bps), I was on the phone to request installation. At the time, I had completely forgotten the words of the technoweenie I had spoken to earlier, who had warned that "cable companies were going to experience difficulty in installing and maintaining this new technology, as it has different demands and peformance parameters than simple cable television transmission." But in my rush to embrace the promise of speedy net navigation, such warnings were easily forgotten.

For too long, I had suffered as my dial-up internet connection consistently failed me, causing me to frequently disconnect during online sessions. I initially assumed it was the squirrels. If you live in midtown, squirrels can be blamed for anything that goes wrong with anything connected to your house, such as wires. The squirrel that I suspected was affectionately known as "Rambo". Rambo, a terrorist squirrel who trained with the Dirty Dozen, resides in a tree bunker somewhere in my yard. I was certain that he was miffed that I had again shut down his weekend party room, and that he was making my life miserable as a result. This squirrel delighted in finding a microscopic hole in my house, enlarging the opening, and then inviting all of his relatives and half the wildlife in my yard to join him for a celebration in my attic, where they ate wires for h'ourderves. When I was finally able to close down his little love nest, I remember watching him sitting on a tree limb, staring at my house, plotting his revenge. His first act was to blow up the transformer in my yard. He then blew up two more down the street as a diversion, putting midtown out of power for a day or so (MLGW will confirm that this is a true story) When he was unable to gain access to my attic during the blackout, I was sure that he had begun to chew on my phone line in an effort to destroy my internet access and drive me insane. It was working.

Bell South was called and after inspecting the outside line, smugly advised me that its line was perfect, and that my problem must be the internal house wiring, which by the way, was not covered by my monthly phone service fee. An inspection by a rogue ex-telephone employee confirmed that there was nothing wrong with the internal wiring. That let Rambo off the hook, but my internet access was still screwing up. As my computer could talk to other computers without dropping off, I figured it couldn't be the modem. My last hope was my internet service provider. Magibox (now US Internet), was insulted that I would even consider that its equipment was at fault. "Must be the phone lines," they said. . . .

With an analog dial up service, even when it works, it's slow. Real slow. Typically, a 56K modem does not connect with the ISP at much more than 33bps, as the condition of most copper phone lines prevent the modems from performing as quickly as designed. My connection was no exception, and because it was so slow, I have not had to worry about my children surfing through porn sites while looking for Bambi videos. The

first time I attempted to introduce my kids to the wonders of the net, I decided to take a look at a movie clip of a film they wanted to see. The process was so excruciatingly slow that both kids eventually left the room, claiming that books were better than the internet. And it was true. Watching a page load on a 56K modem with lots of graphics was equivalent to watching the formation of the universe, one atom at a time.

RoadRunner was going to fix that. Operating at blazing speeds (up to1,500,000 bps), which is seriously fast) every site on the net was a point/click away. No more missed calls because the phone line was tied up. Best of all, the cost ($40 if you already have cable) was slightly more than adding a phone line ($12) and paying for an ISP($20), with 100 times the speed. I looked at ISDN lines (64,000 bps), but when you factored in the cost of a digital modem, the $35 monthly fee plus the ISP fee, it was not worth it. Besides, cable modem was 20 times faster. Another no brainer.

When the cable technician arrived, he smiled and asked where I wanted my connection. I pointed near my desk, whereupon he told me that I was going to lose my cable connection for the tv in the room, as he was going to tie into that connection for the cable modem. I politely told him that I didn't plan on losing a television to gain an online connection. He then said that <u>maybe</u> he could make it work without my losing a tv. (Editors note: This was not a good sign.) He disappeared and returned, saying that he could not find my underhouse cable connection, and that he would just run cable along the side of the house. I pointed to the existing connection in the floor, and said that the last installer had no difficulty in running wire under the house, and perhaps he needed to look harder. Hours later, after numerous high level technical discussions with his supervisor, he informed me that my system did not work, but to go ahead and sign the contract, which coincidentally, said that everything was working perfectly. No problem, I said, as I crossed out lots of language and filled the page with initials and disclaimers. Someone returned the next day, played with the wiring, and announced that I was now online. Well, yes and no.

For the next 6 months, my system would work, quit, work, quit and fade in and out. It seemed to work great at 6am, but frequently failed in the evening hours or on weekends, which is when I wanted to use the service. I was on a first name basis with technical support and countless trips to my house resulted in no improvement. Twice people came to the house to fix my system, after we waited for weeks to get an appointment, and then informed us that they were wiring people, that our wiring was fine, that the problem was computer related, and that they were incapable of dealing with computer problems. Technicians were then called to examine the computer, again after waiting weeks for an appointment, and of course we were told it was the wiring. I finally got in touch with a supervisor (an extremely nice guy who appeared to be genuinely concerned), got his direct dial, and then worried him sick until my wiring was completely redone. (Editor's 2d note: if you are having difficulty with your cable service and need this guy's number, call me.)

To its credit, Time Warner has rebated 2 months of cable for my troubles and the system is now working, although it is sometimes very slow. I spoke with technical support and it appears that upgrades are being put into place to handle the increased traffic, and hopefully the problems will resolve. I suspect this is because competition, in the form of ADSL, has arrived. This technology, which promises cable modem speed across existing phone lines (up to 1.5 mbps), is now offered by Bell South and Telocity in Memphis. It's cost is approximately $50 per month, and installation fees are presently being waived. As the technical issues involved in both technologies are too complex to cover in this article, I suggest you read "Break the Bandwith Barrier", found at www.byte.com/art/9609/sec6/art1.htm. This article beautifully explains the various alternatives available, the costs and the problems. To check on ADSL, go to www.bellsouth.com or www.telocity.com. RoadRunner info is found at www.midsouth.rr.com.

Other Stuff

David Dickson and Bill Jeter have suggested additional internet sites for lawyers. If you are in real estate, check out the following title company sites: Chicago Title - www.ctt.com; First American Title - www.firstam.com; Fidelity National Title - www.fntic.com; Lawyers Title - www.ltic.com; Old Republic Title - www.oldrepnatl.com; Stewart Title - www.stewart.com. Jeter's site is a great jumping off site for anyone. Try www.ceoexpress.com. (Editor's 3rd note: I could not figure out how to work in a dig at Robert Green's technical prowess this month, but hope to make amends in the next column.)

jbs