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Cable courting telecommuters

By Carol Wilson

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The cable industry is quietly courting the growing number of telecommuters, offering much higher speeds and a business-class service, according to industry consultants at New Paradigm Resources Group.

"This is a growing trend," said Craig Clausen, consultant with NPRG. "Comcast and Cox are leading the way."

Rather than come out with guns blazing, however, the cable industry is doing this on a market-by-market basis and reaching out to residential consumers with higher speed services that also feature static IP addresses and the higher quality of customer support required by serious telecommuters, he said. NPRG's research turned up unadvertised offerings in several markets, including 9 Megabit per second downstream service in San Diego, Omaha and Oklahoma City for between \$69.95 and \$119.00 a month. The service comes with a static IP address and priority customer service.

Clausen, who lives in the Chicago area, received a Comcast pitch for a telecommuter service at his home.

"It was stuck in the mailbox, and it was a photocopied black and white piece of paper, not their usual glossy trifold," he said. "It was very rough, but it contained bullet points that listed all the things you need to telecommute, including permanent IP addresses."

Typical residential cable offerings use dynamic IP addresses, which are assigned as needed on a per-use basis.

"The way we are perceiving this, they are trying to catch the eye of the residential customer and have that individual take it to work and talk with their employer," Clausen said. "I think there are a lot of issues for them to work out. If they went full bore, it would heighten expectations. So they are starting with more of a grass roots campaign."

Because they are well-established in the residential market with a high-speed data offering, cable companies are well-positioned to attack what NPRG believes is a market segment that is about to boom. "Given the price of gas and commuting times, it just makes sense that we will see a lot more telecommuting," Clausen said. "The technology is there to let you work at home and appear as if you are sitting right next to your colleagues."

Because the infrastructure is already deployed, he added, cable can afford to piggyback telecommuter service offerings on top of their existing customer base offering considerable bandwidth at reasonable prices. Telecommuters would then become a beachhead into the commercial market that cable companies covet, Clausen said.

The question is whether cable can provide the level of customer service that telecommuters would require for both data and voice service, he said. Voice is a particular concern, especially as more corporations look to hosted VoIP offerings, using SIP-based phones to access a network-based service. Technical aspects of a cable network will make support for this kind of hosted VoIP service more difficult, according to NPRG.

The telephone companies are already in the lead serving telecommuters, Clausen said, and their DSL networks are actually better positioned to serve business users in the home because the bandwidth it delivers is more consistent and is delivered over a dedicated pipe. But he still expects the cable industry to become more competitive in this arena – and that's when it might start making some noise.

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