

# Consumer Affairs Victoria

## eCommerce Factsheet

# Internet Service Providers

October 2003

*If you want to get on to the web, one of the first things you need to do is find an Internet Service Provider (ISP). As consumers, there are a number of things you can do to increase your chances of choosing the ISP that best suits your requirements, and of addressing problems if they arise.*

### ***Need more information?***

Call Consumer Affairs Victoria Helpline on 1300 55 81 81

### ***Key Term***

Internet dumping /modem-jacking - When a website disconnects your modem from your ISP and causes it to dial into either an international destination or a 190 number.

### **What is an ISP?**

Internet Service Providers, also known as Internet Access Providers, provide a range of web services to consumers, including:

- access to the internet, usually through a dial-in account
- email mailboxes
- website hosting.

Some providers also offer additional services, such as domain name registration and website design.

There are around 800 ISPs in Australia, ranging from large companies that provide services across the country to small, regionally-based businesses.

### **Tips for selecting an ISP**

#### **1 Compare ISPs. Here are some places to start**

- Check out computer magazines that publish reviews of ISPs.
- Ask friends who are already online.
- Visit a nearby internet café and ask which companies service the local area.

- Ask for some pointers in a computer store (for example, when you're buying a modem).
- If you see an ad for an ISP, call the company and ask them to mail you a brochure.
- For those with internet access, check out the deals described on ISP's websites and the comparative reviews of Australia's ISPs provided at <http://www.cynosure.com.au/isp>.

#### **2 Ask some questions before making a decision**

##### **a) Technical**

- Will all the necessary start-up software be provided? (Most companies offer a CD-ROM at no extra cost.)
- If you have an older, slower computer or modem (28K or less), will it connect to the internet?
- What are the peak times when it might be hard to connect?

## Key Term

Account freeloader - A person who obtains your ISP log-in name and password and uses them to freeload on your account.

- Is telephone technical support available at the times you will be using the internet? Will it cost anything?
- Under what conditions do connections 'time out'? If you are constantly being disconnected, this can mean more dial-ups and a higher phone bill.

### b) Billing

- What are the set-up fees and what are the ongoing costs?
- Is each connection the cost of a local call, or do STD rates apply?
- Is time online charged by the hour, or on a flat monthly rate, or by Mb downloaded?
- What pricing plans are available? How flexible are they?
- If you do not have a credit card, can the company offer alternative billing arrangements?

### c) Extras

- Does the company offer users an email address or multiple email addresses?
- What about space where you can host your own website?
- What is the download limit? Do volume charges apply for large downloads?

## 3 Be careful with free trials

Some companies offer free trials, often in the form of a giveaway CD ROM. This is a great way to try out a service, but always double-check your trial agreement. Check for additional charges and make sure you're not locked into a contract that goes beyond the trial period.

## 4 Watch out for free ISPs

Free internet access sounds fantastic, but there are some restrictions you may encounter:

- Access may only be allowed to a limited number of websites.
- Some free ISPs monitor users' surfing habits and sell this data to marketers.
- Connection may not be guaranteed when you want to connect.
- As payment, you might be asked to view ads while you surf.

## 5 Read your contract

Before you sign up for ongoing access, read your contract carefully. The contract outlines the terms and conditions of your service. It is a legal document, so make sure you know what you're signing.

## Things that can go wrong

You've chosen your ISP and are happily online. Here are some of the things to watch out for. For each problem, there are a number of things you should check for, before complaining to your ISP.

## Large increases in your telephone bill

### 1 Check your dial-in number

Make sure you are connecting to the internet through a local telephone number, not an STD number. Some CD ROMs that offer free trials automatically configure your dial-in to an STD number.

## 2 Call dropouts

An unusually large number of local calls may be due to frequent attempts to connect to the internet. This is an indicator that you are experiencing call dropouts, usually prior to logging on. You can help to avoid this by disabling the call waiting function on your phone and making sure no other equipment is plugged into the phone line when the modem is in use.

## 3 Automatic redial

Another problem that can increase your number of local calls is when the computer continuously redials the ISP. Remember, although you may not have successfully connected to the internet, if the call has been terminated on your ISP's router, you will still be charged for a local call. You should therefore disable your automatic redial facility.

## 4 Internet dumping

Internet dumping, or modem-jacking as it is sometimes called, is what happens when a website disconnects your modem and reconnects it to an international or 190 telephone number. You can avoid internet dumping by asking your telephone service provider to bar access to 190 numbers and by requesting a PIN for making international calls.

## Unexpected charges by an ISP

### 1 Check your download limit

Some ISPs may have a download limit, even on plans that are promoted as unlimited. The term 'unlimited' may actually relate to the hours on line and not to the amount of data downloaded. This means that once you have reached your download limit you are charged for each additional megabyte downloaded.

The word 'download' means the retrieval of any data from another computer on a network – this includes the text, picture and sound files you look at when you are in a website and anything that is sent to you via email.

Therefore web surfing contributes to the total download, as does email. Check with your ISP to find out what tools may be available to help you to monitor your usage.

### 2 Account freeloading

If your ISP or the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) investigates and finds that a person has illegally and remotely accessed your password, the matter is referred to the police for investigation.

However, ISPs differ in their policies on whether or not a user should have to pay for charges that result from access by another user. As a safeguard you should always keep your password private and secure.

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## Making a complaint

All ISPs are required under the Telecommunications Act to be members of the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman Scheme.

The TIO can investigate complaints from internet users about:

- access problems
- billing complaints
- faults
- service contracts
- provision of services
- privacy issues
- internet security.

However, the TIO is an office of last resort. ISPs must have an opportunity to address a complaint before the TIO will investigate.

Before lodging a complaint with the TIO, you should try to sort it out with the ISP. If you are not happy with the outcome, you should get the name of the person you dealt with at the ISP, gather any documentation relevant to the complaint, and contact the TIO.

## Useful contacts

Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO)

Phone: 1800 062 058

Facsimile: 1800 630 614

Email: [tio@tio.com.au](mailto:tio@tio.com.au)

Consumers can also register a complaint online at [www.tio.com.au/complaint\\_form.htm](http://www.tio.com.au/complaint_form.htm)

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## More information

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Information on eCommerce is available from:

**Consumer Affairs Victoria  
Victorian Consumer &  
Business Centre**

113 Exhibition Street

Melbourne 3000

Telephone: 1300 55 81 81

Website [www.consumer.vic.gov.au](http://www.consumer.vic.gov.au)

## Further reading

Consumer Affairs Victoria has a range of eCommerce related factsheets:

- Buying a computer
- Domain names
- Getting a refund on the web
- Online auctions
- Online privacy
- Online scams
- Online security
- Shopping online
- Spam
- Tips for business
- Top 10 tips for shopping online

