Get Online Anywhere With A Laptop Cellular Card

by **KIM KOMANDO**

These days, you don't have to travel far to find wireless access. But some hotspots carry steep prices, and you can't count on finding one when you need it.

So, if you need Internet access everywhere, try cellular service.

All major cellular providers offer Internet cards for your laptop. They slide into a PCMCIA or PC slot, much like a Wi-Fi card. The cards give you Internet access anywhere you have cellular coverage. The concept is simple, but deciphering the pricing and technical details can be confusing. These days, cellular providers tout broadband-like speeds. Certainly, the cards are far faster than dial-up. They fall short, however, when compared to cable

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and DSL speeds. Some networks are faster than others, so it helps to understand the differences.

First, there is EDGE (Enhanced Data Rates for Global Evolution). It offers speeds of 216 Kbps for both downloads and uploads. This falls shy of the 256 kilobits per second (Kbps) promised by a low-end DSL plan. EV-DO (Evolution-Data Optimized) is more advanced. The average download speed is between 400 and 700 Kbps. Upload speeds average 300 to 400 Kbps. Still, it doesn't compare to cable broadband's average download speed of 7 megabits per second (Mbps). You may also encounter HSDPA (High-Speed Downlink Packet Access). This isn't common. Its download speed is 3.6 Mbps, which truly compares to broadband. HSDPA's uploads average 384 Kbps.

Laptop cards generally cost about $200, but you can get steep discounts when you sign up for a one- or two-year agreement. I recommend that you stick with your current provider. Billing will

be simplified, and you may qualify for additional incentives.

Now, let's look at which providers offer which services and how much they charge. Sprint offers EV-DO laptop cards. For $60 per month, you'll get unlimited access to the Internet from your laptop. Depending on coverage, the card may revert to a slower network.

Verizon also uses EV-DO technology with its BroadbandAccess service. Unlimited data usage runs $80 per month. When the service isn't available, the card uses Verizon's NationalAccess service. This provides download speeds of 60 to 80 Kbps with bursts up to 144 Kbps.

T-Mobile's laptop cards use EDGE. For $50 per month, you'll get unlimited data access. You'll also get unlimited access at T-Mobile's thousands of hotspots.

Cingular cards can use an EDGE network. They can also access Cingular's HSDPA network, where it is available. Cingular's plans are more complicated than those offered by other

providers. You can purchase plans that offer limited data access. You can also purchase plans that include access to wireless hotspots across the country.

For example, a plan including unlimited data and access to hotspots runs $100 monthly. An unlimited plan without Wi-Fi access runs $80. If you already have a $40 or higher voice plan, you pay $60.

A wireless laptop card will provide you with greater mobility. You can work from the road or the local coffee shop. But it isn't a magic bullet — just as you experience dropped calls, you could run into problems with cellular Internet access. ❑

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New "Spam" Plagues Small Businesses

It's no surprise to anyone armed with a computer and an e-mail account that the daily onslaught of "spam" that plagues business, especially small business like rep agencies, has never gone away. As a matter of fact, according to the *Red Tape Chronicles*, a blog that appears regularly on MSNBC.com, spam is now worse than it's ever been.

According to the blog, just about half the spam that clogs servers today is what's known as "image spam." This particularly bothersome electronic burden contains pictures that clog servers, and most of them are "stock-related, pump-and-dump scams which can harm investors who don't even use e-mail."

The blog continues, "By using pictures instead of words in their messages, spammers are able to evade filters designed to detect traditional text-based ads. New computer viruses have also contributed to the uptick, particularly a surprisingly prolific Trojan horse program called 'SpamThru' that turns home computers into spam-churning 'bots.'"

The column points out that small businesses are having a great deal of difficulty dealing with this surge in unwanted e-mail.

"One way companies are combating image spam is to turn off all images arriving in inboxes. But that can be a draconian measure, as it will cut off pictures of grandchildren, too.

"Consumers can sometimes spot image spam without opening the message, thanks to hyped-up subject lines like this: 'MHII.OB Best terms and conditions for your investments.'

"Spotting spam before you open it is a plus — sometimes spam messages contain small images that report back to the sender as soon as a message is opened, teaching the spammer that your e-mail address is valid. More spam is sure to follow.

"But in some cases there is no way to tell if a message is spam without opening it. So for now, the best defense consumers have is their delete key — and a heavy helping of skepticism when investing based on anonymous tips.

"The SEC's Stark puts it bluntly: 'Never invest based on spam.'" ❑