

Last month you told us all about your desktops, notebooks, and printers. Now you tell us about everything else.

# Readers' Choice

BY CADE METZ

HERE'S PART 2 OF OUR ANNUAL READER SATISFACTION SURVEY. YOU—the die-hard *PC Magazine* subscriber and PCMag.com member—share your experiences with several thousand digital cameras, cell phones, cell-phone services, VoIP services, HDTVs, satellite radio services, Internet Service Providers, network routers, and MP3 players. If it's a digital must-have, you rate it—and the company that sells it. How reliable is it? Is tech support up to snuff when things go wrong? Would you buy it again? It's all here, and quite a read, if we do say so ourselves.

- ISPs
- Cell Phones & Service Providers
- Satellite Radio
- VoIP
- Digital Cameras
- HDTV
- MP3 Players
- Network Routers

## ISPs

THIS YEAR WE treat Internet service providers a little differently. Rather than lumping all providers together, we separate these ISPs by technology: cable, DSL, fiber, satellite, dial-up.

Among cable providers, the Readers' Choices are WOW! Internet, which offers its services in the parts of the Midwest, and EarthLink, available in various states around the country—with an honorable mention for Central Florida-based Bright House. Each receives an overall score of at least 8 out of a possible 10—significantly better than average. Meanwhile, Adelphia and Charter bring up the rear, with overall scores of 6.9 out of 10—significantly worse than average.

DSL isn't as localized, and some services are available nationwide. The best provider this year is one of the smallest: Speak-

easy was head and shoulders above the competition. It wins a Readers' Choice with the category's only significantly above-average overall score (8.6). BellSouth gets an honorable mention with a better-than-average 7.6, and AT&T (including SBC Yahoo!) tanked, with a significantly worse-than-average 7.2.

Verizon is the only vendor with enough responses in the high-speed fiber category, but its overall score of 8.5 is quite good, and its 9.1 for satisfaction with speed comfortably tops every other ISP's. For satellite, HughesNet (formerly DirecWay) is the only company with enough responses to be included here, but its overall satisfaction score is so low (5.4) that we can't award it a Readers' Choice. Heck, people who have stayed with dial-up (here, EarthLink is king) are more satisfied.

|                   | SURFSPEED UTILITY (Kbps) | OVERALL READER SATISFACTION SCORE |
|-------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>CABLE</b>      |                          |                                   |
| Optimum Online    | 235                      | 8.0 ▲                             |
| Cox               | 210                      | 7.7 ▲                             |
| Comcast           | 206                      | 7.1 ▼                             |
| Road Runner       | 198                      | 7.7 ▲                             |
| Adelphia          | 191                      | 6.9 ▼                             |
| EarthLink         | 190                      | 8.1 ▲                             |
| Charter           | 178                      | 6.9 ▼                             |
| Insight Broadband | 177                      | 7.1 ▼                             |
| Mediacom Online   | 149                      | 7.0 ▼                             |
| <b>DSL</b>        |                          |                                   |
| AT&T Yahoo!       | 195                      | 7.2 ▼                             |
| BellSouth         | 171                      | 7.6 ▲                             |
| Verizon           | 165                      | 7.4                               |
| EarthLink         | 129                      | 7.4                               |
| Qwest             | 109                      | 7.2                               |

## BETTER VS. FASTER

The best ISPs aren't necessarily the fastest ISPs. At least, that's what our readers say. Two months before *PC Magazine* readers rated their ISPs for our Reader Satisfaction survey, we asked them to run a software utility that would actually test the speed of their broadband connections ("Find the Fastest ISP," August 22 issue), and the results don't always match the survey's. AT&T receives one of the lowest DSL scores on our survey—even though the utility test puts it among the fastest services. Meanwhile, EarthLink's cable service receives one of the highest reader satisfaction scores for speed, even though tests show that its speed is average at best. Tests can tell you something about a service, but not everything.

- ▲ Significantly better than average
- ▲ Better than average  
Within the average range
- ▼ Worse than average
- ▼ Significantly worse than average

|                                      | OVERALL SCORE* | INITIAL SETUP | FEES  | SPEED | RELIABILITY | ISP-PROVIDED E-MAIL | CUSTOMER SERVICE | TECHNICAL SUPPORT | PERCENTAGE NEEDING REPAIR | REPAIRS | LIKELIHOOD OF RECOMMENDING |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|---------------|-------|-------|-------------|---------------------|------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|---------|----------------------------|
| <b>CABLE</b>                         |                |               |       |       |             |                     |                  |                   |                           |         |                            |
| <b>WOW! Internet (104 responses)</b> | 8.2 ▲          | 8.2 ▲         | 7.0 ▲ | 8.3 ▲ | 8.2 ▲       | 7.9                 | 7.8 ▲            | 7.0               | 26%                       | —       | 8.4 ▲                      |
| <b>EarthLink (353)</b>               | 8.1 ▲          | 8.2 ▲         | 6.0 ▲ | 8.1 ▲ | 8.2 ▲       | 7.9 ▲               | 7.4 ▲            | 6.5               | 15% ▲                     | 6.6     | 8.0 ▲                      |
| <b>Bright House (320)</b>            | 8.0 ▲          | 8.2 ▲         | 5.6 ▲ | 8.3 ▲ | 8.0 ▲       | 7.8 ▲               | 7.6 ▲            | 6.8               | 32% ▼                     | 6.9     | 8.0 ▲                      |
| <b>Optimum Online (782)</b>          | 8.0 ▲          | 8.1 ▲         | 4.8 ▼ | 8.4 ▲ | 8.1 ▲       | 7.5                 | 7.0              | 6.6               | 21% ▲                     | 7.0 ▲   | 7.8 ▲                      |
| <b>Cox (1,477)</b>                   | 7.7 ▲          | 7.8           | 5.4 ▲ | 8.1 ▲ | 7.7 ▲       | 7.6                 | 7.2 ▲            | 6.6               | 25%                       | 6.7 ▲   | 7.8 ▲                      |
| <b>Road Runner (2,356)</b>           | 7.7 ▲          | 7.9 ▲         | 5.0 ▼ | 8.1 ▲ | 7.7 ▲       | 7.6                 | 7.0 ▲            | 6.6               | 30% ▼                     | 6.7 ▲   | 7.7 ▲                      |
| <b>RCN (120)</b>                     | 7.5            | 7.7           | 5.7 ▲ | 7.9   | 7.6         | 7.4                 | 6.8              | 6.5               | 20%                       | —       | 7.6                        |
| <b>Cable One (141)</b>               | 7.3            | 8.0           | 5.3   | 7.8   | 7.0 ▼       | 7.5                 | 7.2              | 7.0 ▲             | 20%                       | —       | 7.3                        |
| <b>AOL (102)</b>                     | 7.1            | 7.5           | 5.5   | 7.1 ▼ | 7.0         | 7.9                 | 6.4 ▼            | —                 | 6% ▲                      | —       | 6.9 ▼                      |
| <b>Comcast (4,806)</b>               | 7.1 ▼          | 7.3 ▼         | 4.2 ▼ | 8.0 ▲ | 7.2 ▼       | 7.4 ▼               | 6.5 ▼            | 6.0 ▼             | 30% ▼                     | 6.1 ▼   | 7.1 ▼                      |
| <b>Insight Broadband (103)</b>       | 7.1 ▼          | 7.2 ▼         | 5.4   | 7.9   | 6.9 ▼       | 7.1                 | 6.8              | 6.1               | 30%                       | —       | 7.4                        |
| <b>Mediacom Online (241)</b>         | 7.0 ▼          | 7.2 ▼         | 4.6 ▼ | 7.5 ▼ | 6.9 ▼       | 7.7                 | 6.3 ▼            | 6.2               | 34% ▼                     | 6.2     | 7.1 ▼                      |
| <b>Adelphia (830)</b>                | 6.9 ▼          | 7.5           | 4.5 ▼ | 7.5 ▼ | 6.9 ▼       | 7.0 ▼               | 6.5 ▼            | 6.2 ▼             | 27%                       | 6.2     | 6.6 ▼                      |
| <b>Charter (1,096)</b>               | 6.9 ▼          | 7.5           | 4.8 ▼ | 7.4 ▼ | 6.9 ▼       | 7.2 ▼               | 6.3 ▼            | 5.9 ▼             | 27%                       | 5.8 ▼   | 6.8 ▼                      |
| <b>AVERAGE</b>                       | 7.5            | 7.7           | 5.3   | 7.9   | 7.5         | 7.5                 | 6.9              | 6.5               | 24%                       | 6.5     | 7.5                        |
| <b>DSL</b>                           |                |               |       |       |             |                     |                  |                   |                           |         |                            |
| <b>Speakeasy (61 responses)</b>      | 8.6 ▲          | 8.4 ▲         | 5.2   | 8.1 ▲ | 8.9 ▲       | —                   | 8.6 ▲            | —                 | 10%                       | —       | 8.0 ▲                      |
| <b>BellSouth (911)</b>               | 7.6 ▲          | 7.6 ▲         | 5.9 ▲ | 7.4 ▲ | 7.8 ▲       | 7.8 ▲               | 7.1              | 6.4               | 16% ▼                     | 6.8     | 7.5 ▲                      |
| <b>Alltel (132)</b>                  | 7.4            | 7.4           | 6.1   | 7.2   | 7.5         | 7.6                 | 7.2              | 7.1 ▲             | 13%                       | —       | 7.3                        |
| <b>EarthLink (388)</b>               | 7.4            | 7.5           | 5.3 ▼ | 7.1   | 7.5         | 7.7                 | 7.0              | 5.3 ▼             | 7% ▲                      | —       | 6.9 ▼                      |
| <b>Verizon (1,572)</b>               | 7.4            | 7.3 ▼         | 6.5 ▲ | 7.1   | 7.7         | 7.3 ▼               | 6.9 ▼            | 6.1               | 10% ▲                     | 6.5     | 7.6 ▲                      |
| <b>MSN (84)</b>                      | 7.3            | 7.4           | 6.2   | 7.3   | 7.6         | 7.5                 | 6.7              | —                 | 8%                        | —       | 7.1                        |
| <b>AT&amp;T** (2,171)</b>            | 7.2 ▼          | 7.2 ▼         | 6.4 ▲ | 7.0 ▼ | 7.5 ▼       | 7.5                 | 6.5 ▼            | 5.8 ▼             | 13%                       | 6.4     | 7.2                        |
| <b>FrontierNet (94)</b>              | 7.2            | 7.6           | 5.5   | 6.8   | 7.3         | 7.4                 | 6.9              | 6.4               | 27% ▼                     | —       | 6.8                        |
| <b>Qwest (431)</b>                   | 7.2            | 7.3           | 5.9   | 7.0 ▼ | 7.5         | 7.0 ▼               | 6.9              | 6.6               | 14%                       | 7.1     | 7.2                        |
| <b>Sprint (142)</b>                  | 7.1            | 7.2           | 5.2 ▼ | 7.1   | 7.4         | 7.5                 | 6.8              | 6.4               | 15%                       | —       | 7.1                        |
| <b>AOL (89)</b>                      | 7.0            | 7.6           | 5.5   | 7.3   | 7.5         | 7.9 ▲               | 7.0              | —                 | 4% ▲                      | —       | 6.9                        |
| <b>CenturyTel (94)</b>               | 7.0            | 7.1           | 5.4   | 7.1   | 7.4         | 6.9                 | 7.0              | 6.5               | 21%                       | —       | 7.1                        |
| <b>AVERAGE</b>                       | 7.4            | 7.5           | 5.8   | 7.2   | 7.6         | 7.5                 | 7.0              | 6.3               | 13%                       | 6.7     | 7.2                        |
| <b>FIBER</b>                         |                |               |       |       |             |                     |                  |                   |                           |         |                            |
| <b>Verizon (270 responses)</b>       | 8.5            | 8.4           | 7.3   | 9.1   | 8.9         | 8.0                 | 7.8              | 7.1               | 11%                       | —       | 8.9                        |
| <b>SATELLITE</b>                     |                |               |       |       |             |                     |                  |                   |                           |         |                            |
| <b>HughesNet (124 responses)</b>     | 5.4            | 6.2           | 3.3   | 5     | 5.4         | 6.2                 | 5.2              | 4.5               | 17%                       | —       | 5.0                        |
| <b>DIAL-UP</b>                       |                |               |       |       |             |                     |                  |                   |                           |         |                            |
| <b>EarthLink (136 responses)</b>     | 7.3 ▲          | 7.8 ▲         | 5.9 ▼ | 5.7 ▲ | 7.8 ▲       | 7.9 ▲               | 7.3 ▲            | 6.1               | 1%                        | —       | 7.1 ▲                      |
| <b>MSN (78)</b>                      | 7.0 ▲          | 7.2           | 5.9   | 5.4   | 7.2         | 7.6                 | 6.9              | —                 | 0% ▲                      | —       | 7.1                        |
| <b>NetZero (59)</b>                  | 6.4            | 7.6           | 7.8 ▲ | 5.3   | 7.0         | 7.0                 | —                | —                 | 2%                        | —       | 6.8                        |
| <b>AT&amp;T** (76)</b>               | 6.3            | 7.1           | 6.2   | 4.7   | 6.9         | 7.3                 | 6.2              | —                 | 3%                        | —       | 6.5                        |
| <b>PeoplePC Online (53)</b>          | 6.3            | 6.9           | 7.6 ▲ | 5.2   | 6.8         | —                   | —                | —                 | 2%                        | —       | 6.7                        |
| <b>AOL (16)</b>                      | 5.8 ▼          | 7.1           | 4.6 ▼ | 4.4 ▼ | 6.1 ▼       | 7.2                 | 5.8 ▼            | 5.2               | 2%                        | —       | 5.7 ▼                      |
| <b>AVERAGE</b>                       | 6.5            | 7.3           | 6.4   | 5.1   | 7.0         | 7.4                 | 6.6              | 5.6               | 1%                        | —       | 6.7                        |

\* The overall score is based on answers to the question "Overall, how would you rate this Internet service provider?" It is not the average of the other scores in this table. \*\* Including SBC Yahoo!

## HOW TO READ THE TABLES

**RED** denotes Readers' Choice. Except where noted, scores are on a scale to 1 to 10, where 10 is best.

— Indicates that we do not have enough survey data to give the company a score.

▲ Significantly better than average (at least 2 confidence intervals up from the average)

▲ Better than average (at least 1 confidence interval but less than 2 confidence intervals up from the average)

Within the average range

▼ Worse than average (at least 1 confidence interval but less than 2 confidence intervals down from the average)

▼ Significantly worse than average (at least 2 confidence intervals down from the average)

Confidence intervals are calculated with a statistical t-test, and these will vary from vendor to vendor, depending on the number of readers providing data and the consistency of their responses. This can give different meanings to identical numerical scores, because the more responses a vendor gets—or the more in agreement readers' assessments were—the smaller its confidence interval. (That is, we're more confident in the statistical sample.)



### CABLE: WOW! INTERNET, EARTHLINK

WOW! scores highest. But you can't get its service unless you live in certain parts of the Midwest. And EarthLink, available in various states across the country, is only just behind.

### DSL: SPEAKEASY

It's a small company, but readers love Speakeasy. No other DSL vendor—or cable company, for that matter—even comes close to its overall score, an 8.6 out of 10.

**HIGH-SPEED FIBER: VERIZON** Yes, Verizon is the only vendor in this subcategory. But check out its amazing 9.1 for satisfaction with speed.

### SATELLITE: NONE

Satellite may be your only broadband option and HughesNet may be the only vendor, but its incredibly low scores—including an overall score of 5.4!—are in no way deserving of a Readers' Choice.

**DIAL-UP: EARTHLINK** Still wanna go the cheap but slow route? EarthLink is your best bet. Readers rate its service a 7.3 out of 10.

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