

A Demonstration of Speed

Cox Will Let Its Customers Test First, Purchase Later

Cox Communications Inc. is not only going to tell customers why they might want to upgrade their cable-modem service to a higher throughput, it is going to show them what that service looks like with an on-demand demo.

The cable operator is now working with network gear provider Camiant Inc. to offer customers a temporary upgrade their cable-modem service to a faster tier, part of a "try it before you buy it" marketing strategy. That same speed-boosting application may also lead to services that offer customers bandwidth-on-demand bursts to download movies or upload summer vacation photos to the Web.

Speed upgrade demos are not new for Cox, which last year began offering weekend bandwidth upgrades for select groups of customers. But that's a manual process, and it extends a temporary speed bump to a whole group of users, rather than just those interested in a service upgrade.

INDIVIDUAL UPGRADES

Enter Camiant's bandwidth-on-demand technology, which can apply speed upgrades for individual customers on the spot. It combines Camiant's policy servers – devices located in regional data centers or major Internet connection hubs that control who is allowed network access and how much bandwidth they are allowed – with a new speed preview application that manages customer requests.

Cox hasn't decided exactly how to market the speed demo when it rolls out later this year, but one way may be sending customers an e-mail with a link to the demo. A click from a customer sends a command to Camiant's policy server, confirming that the customer is qualified for the speed upgrade.

The policy server then routes the request to the Camiant bandwidth-on-demand application, which sends a new configuration file to the customer's modem, thereby resetting the unit's bandwidth level.

At the end of the demo, the Camiant bandwidth-on-demand application sends another configuration file returning the modem to its normal service level. The customer would then be offered a pitch to make the speed upgrade permanent.

"We'll be able to configure those modems on the fly – so we'll have a lot more flexibility to do it and be able to do it on-demand," Cox vice president of data product development and support Scott Hightower said. "We won't have to do it any specific weekend, or we could give customers the flexibility to try the speeds when they are available to try them instead of us telling them a specific weekend."

PACKETCABLE KEY

Key to that system is the use of PacketCable Multimedia, a CableLabs Inc. specification that allows operators to change the bandwidth and applications flowing to broadband customers without service interruption, Camiant vice president of marketing and business development Ed Delaney said.

"In the old days prior to telephony, cable-modem reboots were not verboten," he said. "But in the world of telephony, you never want to have a cable-modem reboot."

Bruce Leichtman, president and principal analyst for Leichtman Research Group, also noted that giving a real demonstration of speed is useful for consumers who are pretty fuzzy on what Megabits and kilobits per second really mean.

"That helps it go beyond just numbers, because 4 Megabits per second, 200 kilobits per second means nothing to even semi-sophisticated users," Leichtman said. "This helps make that tangible."

Cox isn't the first operator to use the Camiant bandwidth boost application. The company also struck a deal late last year with Ohio cable operator Buckeye Cable, which

is now readying for a launch with customers this summer.

"We're hopeful that the first part of July we'll be able to put that on the street," Buckeye vice president of information technology services Paul Shryock said.

BUCKEYE GOES FURTHER

Unlike Cox, Buckeye plans to not only offer a speed demo but also a bandwidth-on-demand feature within its high-speed Internet service, according to Shryock.

Initially, it will offer a one-hour speed boost per month to subscribers across its four residential tiers and three commercial tiers. Shryock noted that taking a conservative tack and offering just one speed boost per month will give Buckeye a chance to gauge customer reaction. Based on that, it could in the future offer more speed boosts to higher tiers or a pay-per-boost option.

"The thought was even longer term we could sell additional hits to the lower tier, but there certainly was the concern that could drain away the propensity for that tier to upgrade," he noted. "We just want to see how that goes."

The idea of dynamic bandwidth features on a broadband service has been around for some time, more in the enterprise services arena. But now with applications such as photo storage added to consumer broadband services, it is seeing a renewed interest among residential data providers, Delaney said.

"It's very easy for Camiant to tie an existing photo upload service to our existing bandwidth on demand application, and every time a customer hits the photo upload service, if the policy provides them that service, you can increase the bandwidth for the duration of that upload," Delaney said.

Hightower said the idea of making bandwidth boost on demand a feature for a cable modem service itself "is something that we are thinking about. But the main thing that we are focusing on right now is just getting the platform deployed."