

Libraries as ISPs

by Kate Williams

An e-mail service from your library? It's a technology your patrons will value.

Alongside the dot.coms and the e-commerce buzz, many valuable public resources are found online. For example, many Ohioans turn to the library rather than AOL or some other commercial Internet service provider (ISP) when they dial up to the Internet. This service typically includes a personal e-mail account, often with the library's name in the address—very good publicity when you consider how far and fast e-mail can travel.

In Toledo, patrons use their library card to purchase dial-up Internet service for \$75 per year. Across the Maumee River, libraries throughout Wood County make the same offer—by means of a partnership with the all-volunteer Wood County Freenet. The freenet connects to the Internet pipelines of Bowling Green State University and houses networking equipment in various libraries.

Who else is offering this service? How does it work and what good is it? Via a survey—on the Internet, naturally, and with 60% of Ohio libraries responding—and a series of conversations with librarians, we found out.

As part of its Internet policy, Akron Public Library has provided 13,000 patrons with a username and password that allows them to use the Internet in the library. With their username—provided free—patrons can also dial up to the Internet and Web from any home computer for one hour a day and more for text-only services. Although not every patron has made use of the service, positive user feedback has helped the library maintain and expand it. "People just rave about the service," reports the library's Ann Hutchison.

An estimated 5,000 people across rural Knox County—one tenth of the county's population—make use of free dial-up services provided by KnoxNet, a service of the local public library. According to Andy Richmond at the Public Library of Mt. Vernon and Knox County, "It has helped people in this rural area jump into the new age. I think the level of conversation about comput-

ers is higher here than it would be in similar communities without this service." The library "gets lots of good PR, and the experience has been a catalyst" to help the library develop other electronic services.

More than 4,000 patrons—again, roughly 10% of the county's population—in more affluent Preble County are customers of the fee-based dial-up service established by their library and a commercial partner. The library attracted the first local Internet provider to the county, offering to house equipment on library premises in exchange for services. This led to area schools partnering with the library for electronic services, saving the school money in the process. "It does my heart good to see that email address on a person's business card, because they're coming through our building," says Preble County District Library director Susan Kendall. "It really put the library on the map."

More than a dozen Ohio libraries reported that they are thinking about offering this service. In Ohio, a minimal ISP can be set up using a Web server and about \$500 worth of equipment. A rough estimate of \$6-8 per month in connectivity costs provides monthly dial-up service to a user. Partnering with network-rich institutions and setting reasonable time limits for patrons can bring these costs way down.

The main advice from these experienced librarians, who all expect to continue their dial-up services, is to plan ahead, because patrons will flock to the service. As Jody Bates at Way Public Library in Perrysburg put it, "It's a great way for people to get Internet access at a reasonable price. It's one more reason people need us."

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