

What's the deal on Free Internet Access?

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About two years ago, some companies began offering a new twist on the Internet Service Provider (ISP) business: they began offering access for free. Since then, experts have been predicting the decline of these providers, but the number of players in the game has been steadily increasing. While there is pretty considerable coverage by these services in the U.S., the number in Canada is starting to grow significantly.

The first question you might ask probably is "Internet access for free, how can that be profitable for a corporation"? The answer has to do with advertising. When applying to use the majority of these free services, you agree to put up with an often-annoying advertising banner that appears on your screen that you can not close during your on-line session. Theoretically, the sale of this advertising space will offset the cost to provide the service. In practice (as many predicted) that revenue hasn't been enough to keep most companies solvent that were built on this model. So why is the free Internet phenomenon still spreading? A quick survey will show that the newest most aggressive players feel that the exposure they will gain from providing this service will increase their visibility in the virtual landscape. They hope that providing something for free will attract clients to their other offerings. Some providers have even gone as far as to provide free access even without the annoying ads. The majority of these providers have a vision of not just providing access, but becoming major players in the new media market. The trend seems to be for these new media players (for example: Spinway) to offer a service through a co-branding venture (Spinway provides the BlueLight.com service marketed by Kmart). Similar ventures around the globe, especially by large telecommunications companies, follow this model.

What impact this phenomenon will have on the traditional ISP (Internet Service Provider) is yet to be seen. But the growth of the free ISP's means that we are starting to see them become available in even some of the smaller centres, yes, even here in Canada. While we all like something at no cost, the question that educators will want to ask when considering the use of these services is, 'what is the price of free'? There have been battles over advertising in schools now for several years. We have seen free audio-video equipment and news feeds offered in exchange for advertising in those feeds. The offering of reduced costs for only providing one brand of soft drinks has caused many questions across the country. Some may view this offering as just another marketing ploy to be aware of and find it acceptable in the classroom. You face countless ads in many of the web sites you would visit even for educational content. Perhaps bringing attention to the required advertising could present opportunities for much needed media and marketing awareness. Others may find the compulsory ads offensive, and not appropriate for the classroom. Christian educators may want to watch the products and services being advertised to see if anything offensive to goals of their institutions are included.

Even if some do not find it acceptable for use in the classroom, I think most would find it acceptable for their own professional or personal use. If you have been concerned about the cost of Internet access, or haven't yet signed up with a provider, take a look at some of the following links and see what is available in your area. A great use of these services is when you are travelling. Once you sign up with one of these, you can then dial in to a local access number next time you are on the road to check your e-mail or browse the web. Many of these providers also supply you with an e-mail account and some even provide free web page hosting.

Below is a list of several of these free Internet providers. Check them out and see if any have access numbers local to you.

[Address.com](#)

This is one of the Spinway members, providing a full suite of services but only available in larger centres in Canada.

[NetZero](#)

One of the largest players, with a growing number of access points in Canada.

[BlueLight](#)

The big K-Mart one, hopefully expanding more into Canada.