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## 'net performance vow falls short

By Mitch Wagner  
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Be sure to read the fine print on performance commitments offered by Internet service provider ANS, a unit of America Online, Inc.

ANS, one of the largest providers

in the country, recently announced a plan under which it would commit to make its Internet-based virtual private network service available 99.5% of the time. The company also committed to 99.5% availability for its World Wide Web site hosting service.

But the commitments have lots of qualifications and hedges. They are so limited that the company won't even pledge that a Web site hosted by ANS will be accessible from user accounts at America Online. Vimal Solanki, a product marketing manager at ANS, explained that America Online leases dial-up connectivity from networking companies besides ANS. That puts parts of the America Online network outside of ANS' control.

ANS won't even refer to the commitments as a "guarantee" a word that ANS officials said implies more control than ANS actually promises.

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But as limited as the ANS commitments are, they are a pioneering effort for an Internet service provider, according to analysts.

ANS is offering, in writing, cash penalties if it fails to meet explicitly stated performance goals. Officials at ANS' competitors, including AT&T Corp. and PSInet, Inc., said they are working on written quality-of-service commitments, but their standard service contracts currently make no such promises. Officials at UUnet Technologies, Inc. said it plans to announce quality-of-service guarantees this month but declined to provide specifics.

ANS' commitments are also limited in that performance tests to measure whether the company has lived up to its commitments are done with ANS' own equipment, run by ANS' staff. And ANS is the final judge of whether the service commitments have been met. Moreover, the commitments apply only to ANS' equipment, which includes its internal backbone and a Cisco Systems, Inc. router on the user's premises.

A good start

ANS deserves credit for taking a significant first step, said Eric Paulak, an analyst at Gartner Group, Inc. "They've got the pieces. It's a start. What ANS is doing here is setting the standard that the other [Internet service providers] will have to follow," he said.

But for truly rigorous guarantees, Paulak said, a user will need more a guarantee of end-to-end connectivity, not just connectivity from the user premises to the provider's backbone. Users will need guarantees regarding delay time not just promises that the signal will get through, as ANS provides now, but also statements of how long it will take for the signal to get through.

Even with the limits, the ANS commitments are useful, said user Shawn Kreeloff, director of corporate information systems at Bertelsmann, Inc. in New York. They provide a benchmark against which to measure ANS' performance. He said Bertelsmann has been pleased with ANS' service, but if that changes, the commitments can be used as leverage to get better service.

"They're measuring their network; I'm measuring mine, too. If I decide there's an issue with throughput, they have to prove to me there isn't. And if I'm not happy with the service, that's one of the items I can use to terminate the contract," Kreeloff said.

In addition to its commitments, the Elmsford, N.Y., company also offers service goals. Company officials said ANS will try to deliver response times of 70 msec or less between any two points on its backbone network although that doesn't say how long it will take signals to reach the user premises. Likewise, ANS will try to deliver "port speed access," so that if a user pays for a 10M bit/sec. line, for instance, the user will receive 10M bit/sec. throughput at all times. ANS won't be penalized, however, if it doesn't meet its performance goals.

A race for quality

ANS is one of the dozen or so biggest Internet providers in the U.S. that are generally referred to as the backbone providers of the Internet. It is

one of about 100,000 interconnected networks that compose the Internet. ANS has a 45M bit/sec. network that stretches across the continental U.S. and covers Hawaii. Comparable Internet backbone networks include those of AT&T, PSInet, UUnet and MCI Communications Corp.

NS is first out of the gate in a race to give users commitments on the quality of service they can expect in 'net connectivity.

But ANS won't be alone for long. Officials at all the major Internet service providers said they plan service guarantees, and experts expect to see those materialize by year's end.

In May, officials at BBN Planet in Cambridge, Mass., said it is negotiating with major Internet providers, including MCI, PSInet and Sprint Corp., to provide service guarantees for customers of the companies.

And last week, PSInet officials said it is developing plans to offer service guarantees for consumer Internet accounts. PSInet offers access to its backbone for other companies that, in turn, sell Internet access to consumers.

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