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By all accounts, broadband speeds have leapfrogged forward in the US over the past year. A study by content delivery network Akamai concludes that average broadband speeds in the U.S. jumped from 7.12 mbps at the end of 2009 to 9.54 mbps at the end of last year. The study also suggests that the majority of broadband consumers are satisfied with their connection rates.

Market research firm In-Stat did the research, noting that the average downlink speed for broadband subscribers is 9.54 Mbps, up from the 2009 average 7.12 Mbps, which was itself up from 2008 average of 3.8 Mbps. The price of fixed broadband, by comparison, rose by only 4% among the 518 households surveyed.

None of which will give you much comfort as you sit fuming at your computer, watching as it takes some 30 minutes to load a single web page. Or when you can't complete an online CPE course because the connection keeps timing out before you can upload the test answers.

And the widely available speed tests are not much help if they measure only upload and download speeds. These tests, including the offered by the US government at <http://www.broadband.gov/qualitytest/about/#qualitytest>, tell only part of the story – and perhaps the least important part.

Broadband speeds that are advertised by most Internet Service Providers – and serves as the basis of your data plan – measures only the size of the broadband “pipe.” It does not measure the flow of data within the pipe, or how that data is routed between the source server and your computer.

So it is pretty easy for you to have broadband “speeds” of 10 Mbps and still sit fuming while it takes minutes or even hours to download a simple file. There are two different and somewhat complicated villains here. The first is the Domain Name Server, or DNS, that is in use. The Internet does not operate by the domain names you type into your browser, but rather a numerical address assigned to that domain (much like a letter addressed to “Joe Smith Accounting” must have a street address to get delivered). When you type an address into your browser, the first thing your ISP

has to do is go to one or more Domain Name Servers to get the numerical address.

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...these servers is jammed up, your data can sit while you wait, and wait.

So what can you, as a consumer, do about all of this? Here are a few steps:

First, ask for more bandwidth. If you are told that your ISP only offers up to a certain speed tier in your area (say, 3 Mbps for \$39.95 per month), call customer service and ask them to turn it up to 5. Surprisingly, this often works. Note that tech support cannot do this for you, only customer service, and there may be additional cost.

Measure latency as part of your broadband speed test, and complain if your latency rates are out of what (like 180 milliseconds for a cable connection). Make them fix it. Don't tell them if your system is wireless. Though wi-fi has been around for some 15 years and is a stable protocol, some less-than-ethical ISPs will simply blame all your woes on wireless, shrug and walk away. Far easier than dealing with the real problem.

Be patient. Sometimes latency is a problem of the mergers and acquisitions taking place in the Internet space. CenturyLink, for example, has gone from Sprint to Embarq to CenturyLink to acquiring Qwest, and their network is a mess. If your speed is slow on the Centurylink network...well, not much you can do except complain.

Keep your system up to date. If you are still running a machine on Windows XP, with a 1Mbps connection on a modem that is five years old or more...well, you are just not going to get much sympathy.

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