

Taking Advantage of Public WiFi Hotspots



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If you are a road warrior away from your home town you may not have an easily accessible place to find an Internet connection for your laptop enabling access to the Internet world to get your email, read reports, work on Excel spreadsheets and send off a Power Point presentation. That's where WiFi 'hotspots' come into our picture, something we touched on before. These are wireless networks that can be very convenient.

Many cities have jumped on the bandwagon of providing WiFi throughout the downtown core. Enabling business people to use this facility provides a boost to the local economy.

There is a cost to the municipality of doing this, of course. They need a provider to set up and maintain the network. The physical structure of the network has to take the size and layout of the city, tree cover, landscape and other factors into consideration. I read a recent article which addressed the problems some major cities are having with WiFi zones. Chicago and L.A. have given up because it is too costly resulting from advertising revenue projections being too high.

Of course you can always go to the over-priced coffee shop where asking for a regular coffee brings a blank stare.

Before you ride merrily off to the next burg you need to know if your hardware will support WiFi. A wireless network uses radio waves just like cell phones,

televisions and radios do. In fact, communication across a wireless network is a lot like two-way radio communication. Here's what happens:

1. A computer's wireless adapter translates data into a radio signal and transmits it using an antenna.
2. A wireless router receives the signal and decodes it. It sends the information to the Internet using a physical, wired Ethernet connection.

The process also works in reverse, with the router receiving information from the Internet, translating it into a radio signal and sending it to the computer's wireless adapter.

As long as they all have wireless adapters, several devices can use one router to connect to the Internet. This connection is convenient and virtually invisible, and it's fairly reliable. If the router fails or if too many people try to use high-bandwidth applications at the same time, however, users can experience interference or lose their connections.

If you want to take advantage of public WiFi hotspots, the first thing you'll need to do is make sure your computer has the right wireless gear. Most new laptops and many new desktop computers come with built-in wireless transmitters. If your laptop doesn't, you can buy a wireless adapter that plugs into the PC card slot or USB port. Desktop computers can use USB adapters, or you can buy an adapter that plugs into the PCI slot inside the

computer's case. Many of these adapters can use more than one 802.11 standard.

Once you've installed your wireless adapter and the drivers that allow it to operate, your computer should be able to automatically discover existing networks. This means that when you turn your computer on in a WiFi hotspot, the computer will inform you that the network exists and ask whether you want to connect to it. If you have an older computer, you may need to use a software program to detect and connect to a wireless network.

The question might be asked as to why not use a web-enabled PDA device. They

are wonderful for most emailing but they are problematic when it comes to opening attachments or working with lengthy reports. The screen is so small you can get a headache just from squinting at them too long. And your typing skills can drop dramatically so that your messages can be almost unintelligible. So for the 'heavy-duty' stuff a laptop that can access WiFi becomes not just convenient but a necessity.

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