



BANDWIDTH MONSTERS

Is your bandwidth meeting guess expectations?

This is a loaded question. The common question is, how much bandwidth do I need? The easy answer is how much can you afford? Who sets the expectations; those that have low expectations such as e-mail and Web browsing, or are those guests using Netflix, Slingbox™, smartphones, large file VPNs—all software that will be consuming large amounts of your bandwidth—are they now the benchmark? The admin side is also impacted by bandwidth with the significant migration to IP-based platforms. For this article we will focus on the guest side, since that directly translates to rooms sold and the guest experience, which impacts your hotel's operating performance.

So how do you define high-speed Internet? Google defines high-speed Internet as "any kind of Internet connection that is not a standard dial-up connection." Is dial up really still the baseline to measure bandwidth? In the initial stages of bandwidth development, broadband battled dial-up Internet so the Mendoza line was set at 128Kb. While that definition has stood, the reality has clearly changed.

Now, the notion of high speed starts at 768Kb and can go higher than 5 MB per user in a hotel. At home, 5 MB may just be the starting point. From the hoteliers we polled, those with higher limits (768 Kb per user and above) and the bandwidth to withstand the guests usage, had much higher service scores than those with lower limits (384 Kb per user and below). The poll wasn't designed to say more bandwidth equals happier guests but instead to see how availability of bandwidth reflects on guest scores. It seems simple, but in a tight economy most don't have the money to throw into bandwidth just to hope it raises guest scores and sells rooms. To understand what we need, let's consider first what is causing guest demand.

BANDWIDTH USAGE SKYROCKETS

It is understood that bandwidth demands for travelers are rising at a tremendous rate, growing literally on a monthly basis. Several years ago, a T1 (1.5 Mbps circuit) in a 200-room hotel was

sufficient for all guest needs. Today, that would barely suffice for three or four users in that same business class hotel. What is causing such a dramatic change in how we use the Web?

The primary culprit is simple; the advent and introduction of all the consumer applications and devices that people are using that simply require one touch or click. It takes very little configuration, knowledge or experience to run any of these applications guests use today. Downloading larger and larger e-mail files, connecting to the corporate VPN, streaming video or audio, downloading movies, using VoIP phone apps like Skype or Vonage, watching one's home entertainment via Slingbox, Xbox® 360 and other online gaming systems and using smartphones that leverage (available) wireless networks all can be set up and used by the simplest or the most complex of users. All of these consume your property's bandwidth and can potentially slow networks down to a crawl,

giving your guests a poor experience. I can use my father-in-law as a great example. While his technical knowledge is very limited (I will not share this article with him) he can certainly click a button. We recently purchased a Netflix subscription as a present for his wife. With his \$500 out-of-the-box laptop and a simple icon on his screen, he can stream movies or television shows without any technical knowledge whatsoever. He can also watch game highlights on Websites, movie trailers and on and on.

With iTunes®, which has completely changed the digital music industry, he simply clicks on the podcasts, songs or other media he wants and every time he turns on the computer and launches iTunes it automatically updates all of his content. If you've looked at iTunes content lately, they are big files, which means he needs bandwidth.

In addition to the single applications, consider that we now use multiple applications simultaneously. Gone are the days of one program at a time. It has not become commonplace in a guestroom to see multiple sessions occurring simultaneously. In a business class guestroom the user may be e-mailing, streaming, social networking

Is dial up really still the baseline to measure bandwidth?

and using a corporate VPN simultaneously. In a resort room we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of users online in a single room. Each child has a connecting device (PSP, Xbox, computer) while the parents use their computers or other devices to stay connected. Uploads to social networking sites were up 400 percent last summer in one resort community. That's more bandwidth per session, more applications and more users.

Finally we must realize that guest expectations have changed radically. I recently purchased AT&T U-verse for my home and when I signed up for the 24 MB connection the salesman just shook his head and said, "I don't even know what I would do with that much bandwidth." The problem is most Americans do. Many houses today are equipped with fiber, DSL or cable solutions delivering at least 7 Mbps and up to 50 Mbps speeds or more. These users have grown accustomed to performance in their home environment and don't understand why it can't be somewhat comparable in a hotel or resort.

As preparation for 2010's HITEC were underway several months ago, HFTP's HITEC Advisory Council outlined its top five wish list. On that list was included "Enough bandwidth

for all guests." This underscores the reality that industry IT professionals, hoteliers and consultants all agree that this continues to be a high need in hotel operations. It will also be a pivotal part in providing the backbone for any in-room entertainment strategy for a given hotel.

KEYS TO ANSWERING THE QUESTION

There are specific areas that a hotel needs to focus on and understand to effectively control a quality bandwidth environment that meets, and perhaps exceeds, guest demands. Most importantly, don't treat this as an IT problem. Bandwidth is vital to selling and retaining rooms so being knowledgeable will allow you to be proactive instead of reactive.

Monitor Bandwidth Utilization If not your IT department, someone at the property should be assigned to monitoring bandwidth usage because it is so important to the guest experience. This should be done every week or month to assure your guests are not maxing out the total bandwidth of the network. Some brands, like Radisson, require average usage to be no more than 50 percent of the total avail-

able bandwidth. If 50 percent average usage is exceeded, they advocate that more bandwidth be brought in immediately. The intent is to assure there is a cushion so guests have enough bandwidth to enable a positive experience. It is fairly simple to set up a procedure with your carrier to monitor bandwidth. Most carriers have online portals that simply require you to log in and pull up the report so the designated person or department does not need to be IT.

Control Guest Usage First, make sure the property has some kind of passcode given to guests to at least limit usage to the guests only. There are still numerous hotels out there that have completely open networks. Doing so subjects the property to a variety of abuses, inclusive of bandwidth absorption.

Second, you should consider data traffic management and controls on how much bandwidth a port or application is allowed. So if you have abusers of, say, streaming video on YouTube, you can authorize X amount of bandwidth (that you define) and no more for those users, preserving bandwidth for others. You can also assign data to travel over given circuits, while other traffic is directed over a different circuit. Again, these types of actions can be done by some servers or other devices

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like a bandwidth shaper or link load balancer. Doing so helps assure the best possible experience for the majority.

Consider a Tiered Bandwidth Offering For those guests that want more bandwidth, consideration should be given to tiered pricing. While contrary to many brand standards for mid-tier select service properties, there is some re-examining going on. Hilton is now testing a tiered pricing model in several properties to measure guest reaction and to look for an offset to the growing costs to meet the bandwidth demands. Five years ago, most brands never expected bandwidth consumption to be at these levels and still be a free amenity. Today, most realize that this bandwidth monster continues to grow and costs much more to properly serve the guests than ever anticipated.

Understand Bandwidth Choices Available in the Market As bandwidth needs grow, hotels must be discerning and research choices for bandwidth to the property. It is a very fractured and fragmented market, and what might be available to one property may not be for another hotel, literally, across the street. Certainly, a broad brush approach (i.e., bringing in a single carrier's broadband to all properties) rarely makes the most sense – for either availability or cost effectiveness.

As you begin to evaluate bandwidth strategies, start by understanding the cost for speed – in this case, cost/Mbps (Megabit per second). A T1 delivers 1.5 Mbps and costs approximately \$400 to \$500 a month, and is generally the most expensive on a cost/Mbps basis.

Potential solutions, beyond a typical T1, that should be considered may include: fiber, metro Ethernet, cable solutions, DSL modems, fixed wireless, bonded T1s and full or partial DS3 circuits. The

expense for each varies widely, as do the providers that may offer the product. Again, the goal should be to commoditize bandwidth buying so the property is getting the most bandwidth for the lowest monthly charge. Other considerations should include scalability as needs change and being able to meet consumer demands nearly instantly, to accommodate those conferences, meetings or special events that require big bandwidth.

Applying devices, like link load balancers, to the network architecture provides the ability to merge disparate types of circuits together, leveraging redundancy and ease with which to scale effectively.

CONCLUSION

Recognizing that bandwidth does have a powerful and direct impact on the guest experience should prompt immediate attention, creating action plans and management priority for each hotel. Often, hotels discover that enhancing bandwidth capabilities translates to improved guest satisfaction survey scores.

So, are you taming the bandwidth monster and is your bandwidth meeting expectations? While the answer may be multifaceted, you should be able to acknowledge if there is sufficient bandwidth and gauge guest satisfaction more effectively. By monitoring bandwidth usage, controlling how guests use the bandwidth, and determining the best solutions to bring bandwidth to the property, you should be in a position to answer affirmatively and watch those guest scores rise. Hey Google! Time to update your definition.

TREVOR WARNER is the president of Warner Consulting Group and can be reached at trevor@warnerconsulting.com.

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