Blindsided by Bandwidth Fees, Online Barkers Think Twice

By GLENN FLEISHMAN

IVING things away, even digitally, can cost a lot. I hadn't realized just how much until I turned on my computer one day last month and discovered that I might owe $15,000 to an Internet company.

Two days earlier, I had started giving away the electronic edition of Real World Adobe GoLive 6, a book I wrote in March 2002 with Jeff Carlson about a Web publishing tool.

Inspired by the declaration of a computer-book publisher, Tim O'Reilly, that "obscurity is a far greater threat to authors and creative artists than piracy," it seemed better to publish a free version than have the work perish from lagging sales and advanced age - a year for a computer application book can be an eternity. (Our contract with the book's publisher, Peachpit Press, gave us the right to publish the book electronically at any price, or none.)

I had anticipated a few hundred downloads of the book from my Web site over the first day, but a brief mention of the giveaway at the MacCentral news site prompted 10,000 downloads over 36 hours before I pulled the plug.

I halted the downloads because, like most Web site operators, I have a deal with my service provider, or host, limiting the traffic that I am allowed to generate without incurring further charges. Such rules are
meant to keep one site's traffic from consuming so much bandwidth - the flow of bytes in the data pipeline as Web pages are called up or other files downloaded - that other customers' sites become hard to reach, or add to the hosting company's own bandwidth bill. The limits are also meant to put a damper on the distribution of pirated software, music and video, as well as pornography.

Some providers offer a cutoff that automatically blocks access to a Web site when a threshold has been reached. Others notify a user and continue feeding out traffic, or simply issue a bill at the end of the month. EarthLink, for example, allows its Web hosting customers 20 to 40 gigabytes a month at no charge, depending on the package, but they must pay $100 per gigabyte beyond that limit.

How much is a gigabyte? In my case, 10,000 downloads of my 922-page book represented about 200 gigabytes. With my account, I am charged additional fees based on the sustained traffic rate after excluding the busiest hours each month. The fees begin when I cross one megabit per second, or about half a gigabyte per hour; for 36 hours, I was well over that number, transferring more than 100 gigabytes during two of the busiest hours.

According to the records we had and discussions with the service provider, Level 3 Communications, I estimated that I could owe as much as $15,000. Level 3 couldn't give me an exact number until the end of the month, but the bandwidth graphs and reports boded ill.

My situation was not unique. The Internet is rife with Web pages that describe why a site offering game tools or information has shut down, started charging, moved to a subscription network or asked for donations to offset bandwidth costs.

Meg Pickard, who writes a Weblog called Life Unfolding, ran into trouble with a project she started in 2001, "Be My Anti-Valentine" (www.notssoft.com/postcard). The site lets visitors send a variety of anti-Valentine cards with such slogans as "You'll do" and "Single is good."

A few hundred cards were sent the first year, Ms. Pickard said by e-mail; the next year, about 1,500. This year, however, the project received over 280,000 page requests in January and February and sent out 30,000 cards. She wound up owing a few hundred dollars in bandwidth fees.

She explained her problem at the site and received donations, which covered the bill. Offers of free hosting then allowed her to continue operating the site until just after Valentine's Day. "It was a shame to have to stop it growing," Ms. Pickard wrote, adding, "But to be honest, I wasn't sure I'd be able to manage a massive bill."

Shawn King host of the Internet radio show "Your Mac
Shawn King, host of the Internet radio show "Your Mac Life" (www.yourmaclife.com), said the program's monthly bandwidth bill of $300 rose to $1,000 after the site posted an audio file of an interview with Stephen Wozniak, a co-founder of Apple Computer, in October 2001.

The weekly live streaming program typically draws 2,000 listeners, and there are about 170,000 downloads of archived programs each month. After the Wozniak interview was mentioned in an article at the technical news-gossip site Slashdot, the Your Mac Life site had 100,000 downloads in a two-hour period.

To Mr. King's chagrin, the site's hosting company had servers robust enough to handle the traffic. "Back in the old days, even two or three years ago, you could count on your site crashing and not having to worry about paying too many bills," he said.

He reflected that paradoxically, a surge in traffic "can kill originality and inventiveness" by resulting in unexpected costs.

Some services, like Speakeasy Networks in Seattle, impose no charge for excess bandwidth at the Web sites they host. "We do have a term of service in place that allows us to go and talk to a user if their bandwidth usage is negatively impacting the overall network," said Michael Apgar, Speakeasy's chief executive. He said he could only recall a handful of times in the last four years in which access had to be blocked. And EarthLink says it almost always waives charges caused by the accidental popularity of legitimate downloads or Web page views.

My own story had a happy ending. After calculating the potential damage, I started a fund-raising campaign that brought in nearly $1,800 from 200 contributors in amounts from $1 to $100. I promised to donate any excess amounts raised - which I thought unlikely at the time - to Project Gutenberg (gutenberg.net), which converts books that are in the public domain into electronic texts.

On April Fool's Day, appropriately enough, Level 3 confirmed the best possible news: I had slipped in just below the threshold after the provider excluded a few peak hours of usage. Although my logs showed that I might have owed as much as $15,000 depending on the cutoff point, the final charge was zero.

I notified donors about the ultimate bill, and only one person decided to revoke a donation. It turned out that in March he had suffered his own bandwidth disaster, and needed the cash.