Avoiding Your ISP's Bottlenecks

A friend once called Time-Warner to tell them that one of their routers was failing. His thanks: Being accused of "hacking the network".

At least 5 years ago (before Wide Open West improved its technical support operation) I called to report that a nameserver wasn't working. The technician said that WOW didn't use nameservers and, when I asked to speak to a supervisor, he put me on infinite hold.

Late in 2008, the nameserver at Time-Warner in Los Angeles crashed and the company's 1.2 million customers were unable to use the Internet.

You may not have experienced problems like these, but your online life will be easier and more secure if you dump the nameserver your ISP provides and use OpenDNS. It's free and the change is easy to make.

"Nameserver" is what the *domain name service (DNS) server* is called and I'll use "DNS" from now on.

DNS is what converts a name you can remember (techbyter.com, for example) into a number that your computer can use (69.89.31.245, the IP address of the server my site is on).

Think of DNS as a gigantic phone book. When you type a URL into the address line of a browser, the browser asks for a connection to the URL and the DNS provides the number. Other services along the way know how to set up the appropriate communications between your IP address and the IP address of the site you want to view.

OpenDNS: Better, Faster, Safer

OpenDNS has been around for about 5 years and I've been using it for at least 4 years because it's a better alternative. The OpenDNS servers could crash someday, but the company says that it hasn't happened yet. Better reliability isn't the only advantage OpenDNS brings to the party, though.

More cache: Your ISP caches (that's a fancy term meaning "stores locally for quick lookup") the IP addresses of the most popular sites, but OpenDNS takes this a step further and caches every website on the Internet. The result is that all pages load just slightly faster than they would otherwise. You may notice the difference, but probably not.

Fixing typos: If you mistype a URL while using your ISPs DNS, one of two things will happen. You might be connected to a site that has registered the incorrect URL; if that happens, it might be nothing more than an advertising site, but it could also be a malicious site that tries to install malware on your computer. If you don't notice that you're at the wrong address, you might give it permission to do what it wants. The other possibility is that you'll see a page filled with network-speak gibberish that might as well say, "Wrong number, bozo!"

OpenDNS has a much better solution. If I type "techbyter.cm", OpenDNS automatically changes it to "techbyter.com" and then takes me there without stopping to call me an idiot.

Or, if I type "techbtyer.com", OpenDNS says, "You tried to visit www.techbtyer.com, which is not loading. Did you mean www.techbyter.com?" With a single additional click, I get the site I was looking for.

Cut the phishing line: Most people are sufficiently aware to avoid phishing e-mails but even people who are both aware and security conscious can make a mistake. Let's say you've just placed an order using PayPal to pay. A few minutes later, you receive a phishing message. Because you're expecting a message from PayPal, you don't check it for telltale signs of fraud. Instead, you click the link.

BAM! Your computer is infected.

This won't happen if you're using OpenDNS, which is able to spot rogue links and then block them. And keep in mind that all of these extra services are free.

Shortcuts: I've had uneven results with this shortcuts, in part because browsers have taken over this function. Because the shortcut information lives on the OpenDNS server, you need to have the (free) OpenDNS service updater running in the Tray.

Most users will want to have the OpenDNS Updater running in the Tray because your computer's IP address or home network IP address can change from time to time. The updater periodically reports your current IP address to OpenDNS.

Shortcuts are defined on the OpenDNS server. I created "tbww" as a shortcut to the TechByter website. When I typed "tbww" in the address bar, though, the result was a Google search. I made some modifications to Firefox and the shortcut worked, but Chrome and IE both took me to a Bing search (and Bing isn't even my default search engine in either browser). OpenDNS support provided a clue for

Catatonic (n.): Italian beverage most preferred by cats.

Internet Explorer and that turned out to be the key for making shortcuts work in all browsers:

For Internet Explorer (version 8), you'll need to create an OpenDNS search engine entry and make it the default.

OpenDNS doesn't have a support page for Chrome or Opera, but I was able to adapt the IE instructions to fit both of these browsers.

Using the feature with my preferred browser, Firefox, requires making a change to the configuration.

If not for the next feature, shortcuts would be the least important feature that OpenDNS offers. Whether it works or not is unimportant to me, but it does work and maybe I'll decide that it's more useful than I thought.

Parental Controls: I'm not a fan of these, but many people are. OpenDNS allows its users to identify and rate sites that fit into any of 57 categories that parents might want to block.

All These Features Are Free?

Well, they're not 100% free. OpenDNS makes its money by displaying ads when you mistype a URL. If you're a business user, you'll pay $5 per year per user. And if you want some extra features at home, you can pay $9 per year for the household.

If you opt to pay $9 per year, you won't see the advertising pages and, if you want to really clamp down on Web usage, you can set OpenDNS so that only whitelisted sites will open. You also get better support.

I've been using the free service, but I think I'll try the $9 service for a year and see if I find the extras useful.

Setup May Be Intimidating

If you have a single computer hooked up to a cable modem (or equivalent), you'll need to modify the network settings. This varies by operating system, but OpenDNS shows you how to make the changes.

If you have a home network (assuming you've set all the computers on the network to obtain what they need from the router), you need change only two entries on the router. DNS servers come in pairs and you'll change both of them.

The OpenDNS IP addresses to use are 208.67.222.222 and 208.67.220.220.

There is simply no good reason not to use OpenDNS. And that, by way of a double negative, is a very strong endorsement.

For more information, visit www.opendns.com. ß

In the Future, Thoughts Will Not Be Random

As of January 2011, *Random Thoughts* will vanish, but another publication will take its place. I've been working on the design and layout for the past 60 days. It's gone through several iterations and progressed from a format that was different but not better to one that's both different and better.

The new name, which you'll see in January will mark the third incarnation of this newsletter. In 2000, I called the publication *Dead Trees* because I printed it and mailed it to clients. In February 2003, I changed the name to *Random Thoughts* and started using a different page layout application to create it.

Prior to February 2003, I used Ventura Publisher to create the newsletter, but then I switched to Adobe InDesign. The Adobe product was far inferior to Ventura in those days, but it was clear that Corel planned no future development for Ventura and that Adobe had development objectives sketched out for the next decade.

Why *Random Thoughts*? My interests include both technology and marketing, so one month's newsletter might be about a bourbon marketer and the following month's article might be about a technology expo in New York City.

That wide-ranging selection topics will continue and I hope that you enjoy the variety. The overall design, graphics, and typefaces will change and my objective was to make the new format readable and visually interesting.

The January issue will discuss the CS5 version of Adobe InDesign, which is the most complete and most powerful version in the history of the application.

About 7 years ago I chided Adobe for creating a product that, while advanced in many ways, was incapable of performing tasks that my favorite antique, *Ventura Publisher*, had been able to do since the late 1980s. No more. *Adobe InDesign* is now the clear leader. *Ventura* is gone. *PageMaker* is gone. *Frame* (or *FrameMaker*) is gone. *Quark Xpress* is on the ropes. The king is *InDesign*.

Sorry, but you can't see it until January.

One of the things I complained about in 2004 was InDesign's inability to create a paragraph that spans multiple columns in a layout. One of the most common newsletter designs is a 3-column layout. Previously, if you needed a headline to span the columns, you had to create a separate frame. Now (finally!) you can just define a paragraph that spans columns.

This is a 2-column layout, but the headline for this section spans columns and there is no extra frame.

But the developers went beyond providing the ability to span column and created an inverse function. If you have a series of short bullet points, you can also define a style that turns one column into many.

Seeing this was definitely an "Oh, wow!" moment.

The new format will appear in your e-mail inbox starting in January.

In January, it will be in focus, too. ß