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D.C. View | Finding telecom service can require detective work

By Rob Pegoraro
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You'd be a little crazy to shop for a home without considering the Internet, phone and TV options awaiting in a new neighborhood. But good luck finding that out, especially when it comes to new services.

Consider the fuss over Verizon's Fios, which delivers fast Internet access as well as telephone and television service on fiber-optic wires. For customers who live out of the reach of DSL or have trees, buildings or hills blocking a satellite signal, it has been the first alternative to the local cable-TV monopoly.

But Verizon treats its plans for Fios like a state secret. Finding out when this service might show up at your door requires detective work or outright clairvoyance.

The worst such example may be in Washington, D.C. Verizon has rolled out Fios in every surrounding jurisdiction, but D.C. residents are still waiting to hear when it might reach their homes.

Searching for service by typing in a District address on Verizon's Web site generated only a bland, meaningless assurance: "Our network is continually being expanded." Verizon's public-relations department was no more informative.

"We've not announced plans at this point for D.C.," spokeswoman Christy Reap wrote in an e-mail. "Comcast would love to know our advance plans for the District, and we're not inclined to help them any sooner than we have to."

Verizon routinely gives the silent treatment to customers awaiting its service.

You can find scraps of information on Verizon's state subsidiaries' Web sites.

The best clue of imminent Fios service remains a sighting of a Verizon truck with a Fios logo.

Customers who don't know what's coming can sign up only for what they know exists today. And if something better arrives later, they may not be able to upgrade without paying early-termination fees to bail out of whatever deal they took.

Many users, however, don't even have a solid grasp on their current choices. Some think that only Verizon can provide DSL — even though competing firms have provided DSL independent of Verizon for nearly a decade. Some overlook satellite when shopping for TV service.

More recently, homeowners moving into some new subdivisions have been surprised to learn they are obligated to pay for phone, television and Internet service from one company, which signed an exclusive deal with a developer.

Customers need to research their options. But much of the blame falls on providers that won't adopt the cellphone carriers' practice of offering block-by-block maps of coverage. People are stuck visiting the Web sites of multiple vendors, plugging in phone numbers or street addresses at each — which may still not yield correct answers.

Here's how it should work: You visit one Web site and see exactly what types of service — cable, DSL, fiber, wireless — are available at any given spot.

That's not an impossible goal. Go to connectkentucky.org/Mapping/ to see an example, put together by a nonprofit organization that persuaded broadband firms to publish their coverage data.

Some telecom companies seem to be forgetting something important: It's good business, not to mention basic manners, to answer a would-be customer's questions.

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