

behind the news

As BT pledges to have one million customers signed up to ADSL by next July, the telco's ADSL head honcho Angus Porter tells Guy Dixon why no-frills broadband is the way to go

Angus Porter is a man with a mission. As MD for the consumer division of BT Retail, he is charged with the responsibility of bringing broadband to the masses. His vehicle is the telco's basic high-speed internet offering, BT Broadband. Of the one million ADSL (asymmetric digital subscriber line) internet connections that BT has pledged to achieve by next July, half are expected to come from BT Broadband. Given that the service is barely a few weeks old, that means half a million sign-ups in just under 10 months.

Porter definitely takes the bulldozer approach when it comes to Microsoft PowerPoint presentations. Some 55 minutes into our allotted one-hour slot, and having barely paused for breath, we screech to a halt as the final slide segues to 'Questions?'

We're sure it's not personal. After all, he's hardly got time to hang around. Porter must move quickly if he's going to meet the broadband targets set out by the telco's CEO, Ben Verwaayen, the man responsible for BT's Damascus-like conversion to ADSL.

Treading on toes

What's more, Porter appears quite happy to tread on a few toes in the process, even if those toes belong to other BT business units. He describes the ADSL experience offered by sister company BTopenworld less than favourably and adds: "Effectively we've been expecting customers to do their own account management – if you wanted to move home and take your account with you, you had to talk to two different parts of the company."

In fact, if BT Broadband goes as well as he hopes, Porter hints that BTopenworld's future as a supplier of broadband services is far from guaranteed. "If customers vote our way, BTopenworld will stop selling broadband and will become more focused on content aggregation," he says.

The knives are out

Next up for a mauling is a well-known medium-sized ISP that has managed to generate impressive column inches with its aggressive ADSL pricing. Porter is adamant that such cost-cutting means it can't be making any money on the deal and proceeds to take us through a breakdown of expenses that make up the company's monthly charge. "If you take away what



they're paying BT Wholesale, peering and other network costs, you're looking at £1.50 per month for support, which means their helpdesk must be positively heroic."

Poised for action

Porter's confidence is easy to understand. Since Oftel gave BT Broadband the green light to charge ADSL customers directly on their blue phone bills, BT has brought broadband and phone services under one roof for the first time. By making broadband part of BT Retail's product line, BT Broadband also has direct access to its entire customer base – 19 million households. Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, BT is canvassing all its customers about their broadband aspirations in Europe's biggest ever survey.

With such a rapid rollout planned, BT Broadband has had to ensure there is enough bandwidth to go round. If the service suddenly found itself with several hundred thousand customers all downloading audio files and video clips, its network would soon grind to a halt. To avoid any such bottleneck, BT Broadband is prompting a much needed debate on the economic feasibility of unmetered usage by making it clear that the network has been configured for users to download no more than 1GB per day. In other words, heavy-duty users will be moved on.

Meanwhile, Porter is showing off the launch page on which BT Broadband houses content from third parties. By ditching its own content creation and aggregation, BT Broadband has been able to price its service at £27 per month, £3 less than BTopenworld and £8 less than AOL. ■

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