

IT ZONE

By Alexander J. Hanna

Should You Pay For Wireless Internet @ Hot Spots?

When confronted with this question here's what different people say – 'NO', that's what most users of the Internet say; and a big 'YES', is what those who charge for wireless Internet hot spots usage say.

First let me recount a little story; I recently traveled to Philadelphia and stayed at a hotel in the center of town. When I finally got around to turning on my laptop and starting my browser, to my utter shock, the system displayed a site that said it was going to cost me \$9.95 to use the Internet for the day. What was also interesting is that the site did not charge for usage for 24 hours from the time the payment was made. Instead, their day began at 3 PM until 3 PM the next day. Well, guess what? It was around 11AM when I encountered this site. This meant that once I paid the \$9.95, I only had four hours of Internet usage remaining – unbelievable but true! So I did the next best thing and waited until 3 PM to make the payment for using the Internet. I needed access and therefore had no choice but to pay for it.

When I travel, I always ask if the hotel has Internet access, but I have never asked if it was paid or free. This is because during my travels, I have become so used to having free Internet access at hotels, it was just the norm. After my experience however, you know that I will not be staying at that hotel in Philadelphia again; and, in future, I will always ask if Internet access is free or paid. In the case of hotels, I have a real problem paying for Internet access as hotels should realize that it gives them a competitive edge.

How does Wireless Internet Work?

I think that it is important to explain how the Wireless Internet Hot Spot works, for those who are not familiar with the technology. It will allow you to be in better position to answer the title question. Businesses must first acquire Internet services from one of the local providers before they can offer wireless Internet access. Once completed, the business will then install a device that provides wireless Internet access. It is at this point that the device can be configured for free, paid, or free but controlled wireless access usage.

A wireless Internet device has the ability to provide wireless coverage over a certain area. The closer you are to the device, the better your wireless signal will be. If you move too far away, you will lose the signal. The coverage area depends on a number of factors including building walls, steel, and the type of device you select. Generally speaking, the devices have limited coverage. However, another technology called Broadband allows for a wider area of coverage, which I will discuss briefly, later in this article.

In order to connect to a wireless Internet device, you need a laptop with a wireless card. With older laptops you needed to purchase a separate card that you could insert into a slot in your laptop. However, in newer laptops, the wireless capability is built into the laptop and requires no other device, which is very convenient.

Local Providers of Wireless Internet Hot Spots

As I mentioned earlier, many businesses provide wireless access to the public. Some offer paid access while others offer free usage. Still others provide free but controlled access.

Free but Controlled Access

Take the example of local Starbucks stores; they provide free but controlled wireless access to their customers. In this case, you simply request a wireless Internet coupon from the cashier who prints it for you. This coupon provides you with a user id and password with a limited usage of one hour. When you open the Internet browser, you will be forwarded to the Starbucks' wireless Internet home page which will request the user id and password. Without the id and password, you will not be allowed to access the Internet. Once you successfully access the Internet, you will be able to use it, for up to one hour. If you need more Internet time, you simply request another coupon from the cashier. Therefore, providing free but controlled wireless access becomes a competitive edge for Starbucks.

I remember when Starbucks first opened their downtown store, they did not use coupons. All you had to do was start your Internet browser and select the Starbucks wireless network and you were online. However, they soon introduced the coupon process. I believe this was done because many people (especially tourists and cruise ship workers) spent an extended amount of time in their store without buying anything, but simply sat down and used the Internet. Most of them used Internet telephone services to speak with people outside The Bahamas. I know this well, because I have often not been able to find a seat in Starbucks back then.

Paid Wireless Access

I would classify businesses that charge for their wireless Internet access into two different categories.

1. If the sole purpose of the business is to provide a service (i.e. business service center, web shop), then I have no problem with them charging for wireless internet service. In these types of businesses, you will visit their location, pay for a coupon with a time limit to use their Internet service.
2. However, I have a problem if the main purpose of the business has nothing to do with Internet services but they provide paid wireless Internet service. For example, several eateries around here, charge you to use their wireless Internet service. Why should I pay for wireless service when I am already paying to eat at their establishment? Wireless Internet access should be a value-added service!

I know of an eatery that I used to frequent that charges for their Wireless Internet service. I never used the service because I could not bring myself to pay for Internet access. Then another eatery opened just a few doors away, which offered free controlled wireless Internet access. Well, guess what? For at least a year now, I have not visited the eatery that charged for their wireless Internet service.

Free Wireless Access

The Bahamas Telecommunications Company (BTC) provides free Internet access coverage in a few areas including the Lynden Pindling International Airport (LPIA). However, with all the changes taking place at LPIA, I don't know if wireless Internet will continue to be free. I don't think that you should be made to pay for wireless Internet services at airports especially since the authorities put you through so much; from flight delays, to long lines that subject you to so much stress. The least the airport authorities can do is offer passengers this service for free, as a value added service. Let's see what happens.



Private Wireless Internet

Many businesses have installed wireless Internet devices in their offices to allow their staff members and guests to access the Internet. If installed correctly, the system is secure and does not allow access to the public. However, many private wireless Internet systems are not secure and can be accessed by the public.

Broadband Wireless Internet Access

You may have seen an advertisement where a guy is in a black lake surrounded by trees shouting that he was still connected wirelessly to the Internet. The technology being used here is known as Broadband, which provides a greater coverage area. As long as you remain in the coverage area, you will be able to receive a signal and therefore have access to the Internet.

One of the features of this type of service is that you pay to have an account, which I find completely acceptable.

This must be my month for shocks and awe, because I was shocked and awed last week to learn that BTC had Broadband services. However, it is currently not being offered to the public. Well BTC, what are you waiting for? Many of us out here need this service now. Just imagine being on the beach (in The Bahamas) and having wireless Internet access. Broadband services can be used in many ways here in The Bahamas.

I saw a BTC staff member, who was acting cool, pull out his Broadband card, plug it into his laptop, and voila, he had wireless Internet access. Talk about showing off! BTC, I am making a sincere request, we all need Broadband service which, to me, is more valuable than a Blackberry.

After reading this article, I hope that you are in a better position to decide if you want to pay for wireless Internet access at hot spots or not. The reality is, as the saying goes, 'there are no free lunches'. However, I Alexander J, Hanna born to... will not directly pay for wireless Internet access at any hot spot. Until Next Time (UNT)

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