

Comcast previews its double-fast service

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Comcast, the nation's largest cable company, doubled the speeds of some of its Twin Cities broadband Internet services Tuesday, previewing what it eventually will roll out to its 14.4 million high-speed Internet customers nationwide.

The cable giant doubled the download speeds of its 6 megabit-per-second and 8 megabit-per-second services to 12 and 16 megabits per second, respectively, and doubled its upload speeds to 2 megabits per second.

It also introduced a new "Ultra" service that offers downloads at 22 megabits per second and uploads at 5 megabits per second, aiming it at consumers who want faster upload speeds without having to pay for the cable company's top tier.

That would be its "Extreme 50" service, which offers 50 megabit-per-second downloading but has now doubled its uploading speed to 10 megabits per second.

Prices for the 12-megabit and 16-megabit services are unchanged from their lower-speed versions.

The Extreme 50 service dropped by \$10 a month to \$140 a month, while the new Ultra service will cost \$63 a month with cable and \$78 a month by itself.

The new services are available for now only in the Twin Cities area, where Comcast has 556,000 cable customers, spokespeople said. They said they did not know when the services would be available elsewhere.

The new services are expected to allow Comcast users to conduct downloads faster but also let them upload photos, movies, documents and music quicker. They feed a growing appetite for sharing material, especially through Web sites like YouTube and Facebook. The 12-megabit service can download a high-definition movie in about 67 minutes, about half the time the old 6-megabit service needed, and the 50-megabit service can do the same job in 16 minutes, according to Comcast.

"Our whole driver here is to make this a transformational experience for the user," said David Diers, vice president of advanced services for Comcast's Twin Cities region.

Comcast's main competition in the Twin Cities, Qwest Communications International, the state's dominant phone company, downplayed Comcast's moves, saying consumers might prefer to sacrifice a little speed for a less expensive service.

"A lot of people are interested in their checkbooks right now, and we think, looking at the type of services we have, that we're competitive," Qwest spokeswoman Joanna Hjelmeland said.

She pointed out Qwest's 1.5-megabit-per-second DSL downloading service, which sells for \$15 a month bundled with phone service.

"What I think it says for us is, 'Look at the speeds you're comfortable with,' " she said.

Qwest also is laying fiber optic cable in the Twin Cities to offer broadband in the 20-megabit-per-second range in some neighborhoods.

Comcast chose the Twin Cities to preview its twice-as-fast broadband because it has updated its local infrastructure to handle what some call "ultrabroadband."

To get the faster speeds, existing Comcast users must reset their modems by unplugging them for a minute and then plugging them back in, Comcast spokeswoman Mary Beth Schubert said.

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