ighway Robbery
By Chris Patmore

Am I a techno-ignoramus or are we being ripped off? I'm talking about ISDN here and maybe I've got it all wrong, but hear me out. Listening to BT's new ads for their Highway service they are confirming something that I had known/suspected: nearly all their telecommunication lines are digital, as are the exchanges. We would not be able to have all those wonderful services that they offer such as caller ID, ring back, 1471 etc. So when they offer their Highway service they are just upgrading the connection from your house/office/studio to the street and charging well over £100 to do it. So theoretically if you get a new line installed they should be able to install a totally digital (ISDN) line for the price of a normal line.

here are also other things to consider. They don't emphasise the fact that you have to purchase either an ISDN card (£1000) or, if you only want Internet access, a terminal adaptor (£200-£300). Now if you only want Internet access for a bit of e-mail and web browsing you have to fork out around £400 for 64K access, and that's assuming your ISP doesn't charge extra for ISDN connection. That's a lot of time on the phone with a 56K modem, with local off-peak rates of 1p a minute, and some telecoms providers even give free local calls. From my experience even ISDN crawls when there's a lot of traffic. Sort of like driving a Ferrari in London at 8.30 in the morning.

Now the question is - why are BT pushing ISDN so hard? Because they have invested a lot of money in a system that is becoming too slow and expensive and feels threatened by the fast looming reality of cable 'modems'. So what is the answer? If you've succumbed to the marketing ploys, or are just a techno speed junkie and must have ISDN installed let's look at some

economical solutions. If you have just bought an iMac and are not satisfied with the 56K modem and still have plenty of cash to splash about, Hermstedt (www.hermstedt.com) are about to release a co-ordinated USB terminal adaptor, called WebShuttle for under £200.

Hermstedt supply a complete range of ISDN hardware from top of the range multi-channel cards to economical GeoPort ISDN adaptors (Andante). All come with excellent software packages. For larger offices/studios Grand Central Pro teamed up with LeoShare will allow anyone to send files from their desktop as if they had an ISDN card installed on their machine.

nother European manufacturer, Sagem of France (www.sagem.com), produce a much overlooked Planet range of ISDN hardware, amongst other things. They too are producing a USB terminal adaptor at an unannounced, but no doubt competitive price. They also offer a GeoPort adaptor at a reasonable price as well as traditional internal NuBus and PCI cards.

If you shop around the used Mac market you can sometimes pick up NuBus Planet cards very cheap. Buy an old NuBus Mac and you've got an independent comms station at a knockdown price. The advantage with the Planet card is it will run quite happily with 4-Sight ISDN Manager 3, for compatible file transfer, which you may be able to buy at a greatly reduced price (again second hand) because 4-Sight's PPP software doesn't run with that version. BUT you can download Planet's PPP software from their Website, which will not only give you Internet access but the latest version will even allow machines connected over a local network to share an Internet connection, like a router or Vicom Gateway. This PPP software also works with their GeoPort adaptor.

Motorola also offer a terminal adaptor, BitSurfr for around £200, but this is really only for Internet access as it has no file transfer software, apart from FTP.

 haven't mentioned 4-Sight, or WAM!NET as they are now known, because I personally find them arrogant, not unlike our beloved Quark. In order to use a 4-Sight card on the Internet, users of ISDN Manager 3 were obliged to upgrade to (the dongled) version 4, which realistically only offered PPP as the advantage over 3, at a cost of over £300. And it was still incompatible with the rest of Europe (though a further upgrade has resolved that). If you are a huge studio or publishing house that has to transfer huge amounts of data very quickly then high solutions, with high end prices, are your only answer. Of course a bit of planning and production management and CDs can be sent by guaranteed post over night at a minimal cost! If not, look at the Serial/GeoPort adaptors from our European neighbours, Planet and Hermstedt. They cost a lot less than internal cards and leave those precious slots free.

If there is a clever software house out there that wants to make a killer app here's an idea. A

program that will transfer files over ISDN using any ISDN hardware, and is compatible with all the standard software, ISDN Manager, Grand Central, Easy Transfer. A good example is Global Village's Global Transfer. This offers auto-configuring, drag and drop file transfer with modems. They even have a free 'Lite' version which will just receive files.

As for BT you can always try haggling, or querying OFTEL about their pricing for ISDN.

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