

Free Wi-Fi, but Not for All

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The battle between free and paid wireless Internet access is starting to look like a draw. Or more accurately, a third variation is winning - a combination of the two.

Travelers want to log on everywhere at no charge, while hotels, airports and coffee shops are looking for a way to pay for their Wi-Fi networks as visitors increasingly use greater amounts of bandwidth.

The compromise that is emerging is to offer both free and paid options, with the free services increasingly requiring something in return, like viewing an advertisement or signing up for a loyalty program.

'Our position is, give the user a choice,' said David Blumenfeld, a senior vice president with JiWire, which publishes an online directory of free hotspots but also sells ads displayed on public Wi-Fi networks. 'It's not an argument about free versus paid,' he said. 'It's free and paid.'

Starbucks is probably the biggest example of that model. In February, the company announced plans to switch to AT&T from T-Mobile as the Internet provider in its 7,000 stores.

When AT&T takes over, customers who use their Starbucks card once a month will get two hours of free Wi-Fi access each day. Otherwise, that same time period will cost \$3.99, or \$19.99 for a monthly unlimited access plan.

Sanja Gould, a Starbucks spokeswoman, said the Wi-Fi users there typically spend an hour logged on. So, she said, the company views two hours of free access as a 'meaningful benefit' for customers who buy a Starbucks card.

In other words, loyalty has its benefits - and these days, free Internet access is one of them.

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