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[TECH VIEW]



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William Akridge surfed the Internet using the free wireless connection
at Coffee Talk in Kaimuki.

Several hot spots sizzle for Net use

By Kiman Wong

Let's talk hot spots. No, folks, I'm not talking about nightclubs. A hot spot (at least to a geek) is a place where you can sit comfortably and establish a wireless Internet connection with your laptop or PDA and check your e-mail or surf the Web. Hot spots are pretty hot these days.

Hot spots have become so popular in Honolulu that, according to Intel's second annual "Most Unwired Cities" survey, we rank No. 13 out of 100 nationally in terms of wireless Internet accessibility. Clearly, there are quite a few hot spots that people are using.

Hot spots are not going to replace home or office broadband connections any time soon. After all, it's not practical or polite to move your office into a downtown cafe. However, if you need to stay "wired" and don't mind lugging around a laptop, hot spots are incredibly valuable. They also are a good alternative to two-way pagers and text-enabled cell phones. Even though cell phones and pagers are more convenient to carry and cover more areas, they are limited primarily to text and use tiny keyboards that get tedious.

But I digress. Are hot spots a long-term trend or a fad?

Gordon Bruce, who is director of marketing and sales for PauSpam, believes Wi-Fi connectivity is going to be with us for a while.

"Wi-Fi has already found its way into many of our homes. It only stands to reason that wireless connectivity will also go more public," he said.

"For example, private institutions such as the Plaza Club and the Pacific Club already feature Wi-Fi for their membership."

This technology also is taking root in more public places such as hotels, including the Renaissance Ilikai, Hilton Hawaiian Village, Kahala Mandarin and Waikiki Beach Marriott. They have figured out that it makes business

sense to have wireless access for the benefit of their guests. Borders Books at Ward Centre and in Waialeale also feature Wi-Fi, as do some areas of Honolulu Airport.

However, if you want to surf the Net at the above hotels, bookstores or at the airport, it will cost you. Nothing wrong with that, but for the purpose of this article, I want to look at other hot spots that provide free Internet access to make it easy for the rest of us.

I got together with Bruce, and we put together a short list of our favorite hot spots.

In addition to free Internet access, our other criteria include free or easy access to parking, solid Internet connectivity and enjoyable environs. The last element of this survey is purely subjective.

The only downside is that none of the places mentioned provides electrical outlets, so charge your batteries before you visit.

One of the more pleasant places in town to surf the Net wirelessly is the Honolulu Coffee Co.'s Bishop Store Cafe in the Dillingham building, 1001 Bishop St. It has an outdoor setting in a leafy plaza that's tough to beat. People watching is terrific here. The hot spot covers the entire Pacific Guardian courtyard with a very fast 100-megabyte feed. The manager, Jennifer Joseph, told us she didn't think it was a passing fad.

"We've had this for a few years, and it attracts people that like to sit for a while, which means we probably look busy," Joseph said.

Are sales up because of Wi-Fi? Joseph said that was a tough one to determine. "Our sales are going up," she said, but she couldn't prove if Wi-Fi was a reason for that.

I'm also very fond of Coffee Talk on Waiialeale Avenue in Kaimuki, which has a sort of edgy ambience and great scones. Kaimuki has become a much more interesting place to hang out during the past few years, and Coffee Talk is one of the reasons. The owner, Liz Schwartz, installed a wireless Internet access point about six months ago, and she's convinced it's a winner.

"It definitely has increased business," she said. "We're getting more customers, and they're staying longer and purchasing more goodies. It's a value added that everyone is happy with."

Another very cool place to check out is Starbucks in Kahala Mall. It has both indoor and outdoor seating and provides a relaxed, quiet environment. Parking is close by and free, which is always nice. Wi-Fi connectivity is excellent. It's also quiet, so you can actually concentrate on your work.

Interestingly enough, the connectivity is provided by Kahala Mall management, rather than Starbucks. In addition to the Starbucks location, the mall offers a second hot spot near Macy's and Banana Republic, where there's also seating.

In Hawaii Kai there's Pacific LightNet's customer service center over at the Koko Marina Shopping Center next to Foodland. You can either go inside their offices and place your laptop on a desk, or sit in your car and simply log on any time, day or night.

In addition to wireless access, the store provides, at no charge to students, access to computers, a printer and a copier for research purposes. Students will need a letter of introduction from a teacher.

Pat Bustamante, president of Pacific LightNet, said allowing young people access is "our way of supporting education." He has opened a similar business center in Kailua-Kona at 73-5619 Kauhola St., No. 108, behind Home Depot.

Interested in finding a hot spot near you? There are a few sites on the Internet that provide lists of places to go. Bruce suggests you check out Jiwire.com, which even provides maps and phone numbers of both pay and free hot spots. Jiwire allows you to easily search for hot spots near you, but it isn't perfect -- a few places I mentioned in this article aren't even listed. It is, however, an intelligently designed site.

You also might want to check out hawaiihotspots.com, which covers all of Hawaii. If you have a favorite hot spot that you think should be mentioned, drop me a line. In the coming weeks, we'll look at what businesses need to consider when setting up a hot spot.

Stay tuned.

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