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Think about creating a computer network at home

By Kiman Wong

Nowadays, when you can buy a brand new PC for $500 or less, it's common to see a home with two or more computers. In Hawaii, we're lucky. Both cable modem and DSL connectivity are accessible to most people on all islands. This makes it possible to provide a home network so that everyone in the house has broadband.

However, before you plan a home network there are a number of questions to consider:

>> What type of technology is best to use -- wired or wireless?
>> Will you need to access the Internet in more than one room in your home?
>> Will you be working from home?
>> Will you want a computer connection in an office or extra bedroom in the future?

These concerns can become even more complex when you consider issues such as print and file sharing from within your home network.

(Do your really want your 9- year-old daughter to use your expensive color printer paper to knock out 200 copies of the latest photos of Justin Timberlake or Ricky Godinez so that she can pass them out to the entire third grade?)

In a series of articles over the next few weeks we'll explore how to plan your home network as well as some pointers to help you avoid some costly mistakes -- some of which I've made myself.

Wired or wireless? This is a key consideration.

Wireless technology usually offers the most convenient solution for most families, but it might not always be the best option.

"Wireless" is a buzzword you can't get away from these days. It has become so popular that you can purchase 802.11b hardware from Costco.

"Wireless" evokes visions of sitting on your lanai, downloading e-mail, or wandering around your home with only a laptop, untethered. It's a pretty cool notion, but often the realty is different.

Why? The design, construction, and layout of your home can directly affect whether wireless will work well. Although wireless vendors may claim coverage of up to several hundred feet, it seldom works exactly that way. In addition to distance, factors such as furniture, walls and other obstructions can impede performance. For example, in my own home, I've had to install access points in various places so everyone can connect.

Multiple access points also may be required in multi-story homes or offices.

Another concern with wireless is data security. Although much has been done to address this issue, whenever you put your data into the air it's vulnerable to hackers.

Wireless does offer the advantages of easier installation. There's no drilling through walls to install cables.

Wired connection, may be klunky and less hip than wireless, but when you look at performance and price it stacks up well. The fastest anyone can trade data on a wireless network is 108 Mbit (www.netgear.com). Compared to the 1,000-Mbit speed offered by Ethernet, it's no contest.

Prices have also dropped precipitously for wired products.

Which to choose?

If your applications are simple -- getting online, printing, file sharing -- and you don't need blazing speed -- wireless might be better. This is especially true if you only have a couple of computers (especially laptops) that are located fairly close to each other. I suspect wireless probably would satisfy the needs of most Hawaii families.

However, if you have special application that need enormous amounts of

bandwidth and you don't mind drilling holes in your walls or crawling under your floors to pull cable, then a wired, switched (1,000-Mbit Ethernet) network is a better way to go. It's also less expensive.

In the next column we'll look at what it takes to put a wired network in your home.

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