There is a better way...

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The long and pregnant pause was telling. We were sitting in a Canberra coffee shop, and I had just outlined our proposal to upgrade the Association's internet services, otherwise known as ALIAnet. The silence was broken with a short reply of 'You must be mad! There is a better way.'

This outburst followed protracted and rather lugubrious negotiations with a large relatively monopolistic supplier of internet connectivity. I had stumbled across a rare event: sitting across the table was someone with a broad understanding of the various internet-connectivity options available to the consumer, and indeed someone who not only knew the implications of tariffs and pricing, but could wax lyrical about performance issues as well. The coffeshop meeting was opportune, to say the least.

The dilemma faced by ALIA highlights the difficulties faced by all consumers of internet services at all levels. ALIA members have been clamouring for better bandwidth, but only at a price that the Association can afford. Whilst most large corporations and educational institutions accept that the price of copious (some might say 'adequate') amounts of connectivity comes with a hefty price tag, for most small to medium enterprises, the cost is out of all proportion with the benefit afforded by such luxury.

However, against all odds, we appear to have found a solution to the Association's bandwidth problems that will not break the bank (so long as we do not use the full bandwidth that will come on-stream by the end of the year).

Our original strategy prior to the coffee shop meeting was to upgrade our present single 64K ISDN link (by doubling or quadrupling the capacity), at a price that would effectively double our yearly expenditure on internet connectivity. This would be stage one in the move to broadband connectivity, which is considered not yet mature enough for us to jump onto the broadband bandwagon. Indeed, there are still a number of technical issues that require exploration and resolution before we could be confident that broadband options would suit the Association's needs (or anyone else's, for that matter).

The 'better way' that the Association has now embarked upon is a quantum leap that leapfrogs the broadband option altogether, and propels us into the 'big league'. Not only do we get a much-improved bandwidth, but we get it at a better price, as well. Interestingly, the afore-almost-mentioned major supplier of connectivity was unable to discover and outline the best option available to us, and was rather more keen to sell us an upgrade to our existing services that would, paradoxically, cost more than the option that we have finally chosen. The coffeeshop meeting led us to a better way indeed, by allowing the Association to move directly to fibre-optic cabling and a rather grandiose (and more than adequate) 2MB/s link.

What this means to members of the Association is very clear: not only will we have bandwidth parity with large corporations and institutions, but we will free the bottleneck that has up until now throttled back the functionality of the ALIAnet website. By the end of the year, when the cabling is complete and the new server is in place, members will see big improvements in the delivery of ALIAnet services. I look forward to it, immmensely. ∎