

Portable WiFi Hotspots

Volume 6, Number 8

What is a portable WiFi hotspot?

These devices provide a mobile Internet connection for your WiFi devices by connecting to a compatible cellular network. The most popular device in this category is the MiFi® by Novatel Wireless.

My smartphone has a data plan. Why would I need a portable WiFi hotspot?

Smartphone users with active data plans already have their Internet needs covered, so they don't need a WiFi hotspot. However, since these devices typically can supply WiFi Internet to five simultaneous users, there may still be some benefit. For instance, as you're driving down the highway, your spouse can access hotel reservation details while your son listens to Internet radio on his iPod Touch in the backseat. That might do wonders in keeping the peace on a family road trip.

What kind of devices can benefit from a portable WiFi hotspot?

- Laptop computers are the obvious candidates for this, since few models have built-in hardware for mobile data use.
- Portable devices like the Apple iPad and iPod Touch which are WiFi-enabled, but don't have a cellular data modem built-in.



A MiFi® portable WiFi hotspot is similar in footprint to a mint tin and thinner than an iPhone.

- Portable game consoles like the Nintendo DS and Sony Playstation portable which can use WiFi networks.

Having the Internet at your fingertips nearly everywhere can be unexpectedly useful. For example, you can access trail maps, park information and reviews of restaurants while you're hiking at Starved Rock State Park in Utica.

Portable WiFi hotspots also give you the ability to instant message, email and place phone calls from your laptop (using a program like Skype – see *skype.com* for more information).

Finally, they can provide emergency Internet access during a power outage (assuming you have a battery powered device like a laptop).

How much does a portable WiFi hotspot cost?

Novotel's MiFi® devices are the most common models sold in the United States. There are a couple of different methods for getting a MiFi®, and each has its own cost structure:

- **A Traditional two-year contract with a monthly service fee.** In this case the cost of the MiFi® device subsidized by the mobile phone carrier. Both Sprint (*sprint.com*) and Verizon (*verizonwireless.com*) offer MiFi® devices with data plans.

- Device cost: less than \$100 (possibly free)
- Monthly data plans: \$40 or \$60 depending on data plan
- Typical two-year cost (with a \$40 rate plan):

MiFi® Device (subsidized)	\$50
---------------------------	------

<u>24 months service (24 x \$40)</u>	<u>\$960</u>
Total	\$1010

- **Prepaid wireless data plans.** Virgin Mobile (*virginmobileusa.com*) recently caused waves in the MiFi® arena by offering prepaid pricing options. This approach is attractive for consumers who want Internet access while traveling or commuting. For many, the freedom from long-term contracts is enticing.

Price	MBs/Gbs	Expires	Web Browsing	Emails without attachments
\$10	100 MB	10 DAYS	5 MBs	10,000
\$40	UNLIMITED	30 DAYS	UNLIMITED	UNLIMITED

Virgin Mobile offers two MiFi® data plans.

- Device cost: \$150
- Prepaid Data plans: \$10 or \$40 depending on plan

- Typical two-year cost (with occasional use):

MiFi® Device \$150

Service *11 months @ \$40* \$440

4 months @ \$10 \$40

9 months @ \$0 (unused)

Total \$630

The two-year cost of ownership could be about \$400 less with a prepaid plan, with even greater saving possible if you use it infrequently. There seems to be little incentive to tie yourself down for two years, especially since Virgin Mobile’s \$40 plan does not have a limit on data use.

Isn’t there a new generation of hotspots coming called 4G?

Yes. A 4G hotspot is simply one which works on a 4G (4th Generation) network – one generation newer than the 3G (3rd Generation) networks used by MiFi® products.

Sprint claims that their emerging 4G network offers significantly faster download speeds (up to 10x) as compared to speeds on 3G networks. The problem with Sprint’s 4G network is that it is only available in large markets (e.g., Chicago is the only market in Illinois), though Sprint’s mobile hotspot called the Overdrive™ (made by Sierra Wireless) will shift to the more prevalent 3G system when 4G is unavailable.



Sprint’s Overdrive™ 3G/4G Mobile Hotspot by Sierra Wireless provides fast Internet speeds in compatible markets.

- Device Cost: \$99 (after \$50 rebate) with a two-year contract
- Monthly Data Plan: \$60 for unlimited 4G use and 5 GB (Gigabytes) of 3G data use
- Typical two-year cost

Overdrive™ Device (subsidized) \$99

24 months service (24 x \$60) \$1440

Total \$1539

If speed is important to you, and you don’t mind the spotty coverage of Sprint’s 4G network, the Overdrive™ could be just what you need.

Do they work worldwide, or are they limited to the United States?

Current models are closely tied to their region of origin. If you buy a MiFi® 2200 – the model currently offered by Verizon, Sprint and Virgin Mobile in the United States – you won't be able to use it overseas. There is hope, though. Verizon is rumored to be working on a device called the FiveSpot, which is reported to work on many networks around the world.

International travelers craving an Internet fix overseas may wish to check out a company called XCom Global (xcomglobal.com/devices/) which, for \$17.95 per day, will rent a MiFi® portable hotspot to you which works in 26 countries around the globe. While the cost seems a bit steep, when you've gotta have it...you've gotta have it.

Conclusion

While a portable WiFi hotspot may seem like an extravagance, it makes a lot of sense in certain situations, particularly when multiple people are sharing the connection.

Virgin Mobile's \$40 unlimited prepaid data plan is a relative bargain compared to traditional plans offered by Sprint and Verizon, which impose data limits, cost at least as much per month and require a lengthy contract. Sprint's Overdrive™ 4G mobile hotspot is intriguing, but the sparse 4G coverage in the United States may be cause for concern.

If you have questions, comments or suggestions, you can visit me at the Reference Desk, contact me via email (moetting@hinsdalelibrary.info), or call me at 630-986-1976 ext. 225.

An archive of Tech Talk issues can be found at: tinyurl.com/HPL-techtalk.

Mike Oetting, Reference Librarian
10/01/2010



20 East Maple St.
Hinsdale IL 60521
630-986-1976
www.hinsdalelibrary.info
reference@hinsdalelibrary.info