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Time-share your Wi-Fi

Wi-Fi sharing is a novel concept for users, but service providers are concerned about the possible loss of business, writes CHUA HIAN HOU

Think of it as a time-share scheme: buy a piece of property, rent it out, and get returns.

In this case, the investment is your home wireless broadband network.

Fon is a Wi-Fi-sharing community, and its members can 'rent' out their bandwidth. With a special wireless router that they buy from the Barcelona, Spain-based Fon, members can choose to rent out their wireless broadband network - or just as easily allow other community members to use it for free and, in turn, get free broadband when they themselves go overseas. (See [How It Works](#))

To users, this can be cost heaven: Where they previously had no choice but to pay Internet service providers (ISPs) the monthly broadband bill, they can now recover some of the cost by re-selling their broadband to others.

Being part of the Fon network has allowed 32-year-old James Seng, who travels every other week for his work in 'technology investment', to save a bundle on Internet bills overseas, not to mention giving him access to Wi-Fi pretty much everywhere.

'Like last month, when I visited Korea, I didn't have to pay for Internet access at all, both in downtown Seoul and outside,' he said.

While most commercially driven wireless hot spots, like Singapore's Wireless@SG initiative, are set up in high-traffic hubs like shopping centres - to ensure there is sufficient usage to justify the investment - Fon takes a bottom-up approach. It brings together home Wi-Fi users - increase the customer base - so that there will be publicly accessible Wi-Fi networks even in less populated, and less commercially attractive, areas.

But many companies providing paid wireless access see Fon, which is backed by tech giants like Google and Skype, as an attack on their business. Worse, that it helps their customers become unauthorised resellers without the ISPs getting their rightful cut.

While Fon did not reply to Digital Life's request for an interview by press time, its website has a list of countries and ISPs where it is approved, as well as those that explicitly ban it.

Singapore and the ISPs here are not on either list, but a StarHub spokesman said the company is in preliminary talks with Fon. SingTel spokesman Tricia Lee said the company was not in contact with Fon.

For now, this means that Fon users here are in violation of their ISP contract. StarHub customers, said the company's spokesman Cassie Fong, 'should not resell or otherwise provide the service to third parties whether or not for profit'.

Fon users like Mr Seng, a well-known local blogger, have a different take on the issue. The SingTel customer admitted that he knew he 'was not supposed to do this, but it's not like I'm making money out of it' since he does not charge other Fon users for use of his network, he said.

Fon does not have an office here, or even ship its router to Singapore. But there are more than 20 Fon users here already. Thanks to Mr Seng, actually: He got 20 sets of the Fon wireless router - gratis - from a friend working in the company's Hong Kong office last November.

Fon usually sells the router needed to set up its network for US\$30 (\$46), but sometimes gives them out for free.

Mr Seng, in turn, gave them out free to users here who asked for them at his blog (<http://james.seng.sg>), including one set to Digital Life for review last week.

One user who got a set from Mr Seng is 22-year-old Nanyang Technological University undergraduate Angela Jean.

'I thought it was a good way to allow others to use my network, yet not be liable for any problems caused by a malicious user,' she said.

How Fon works

FON ALLOWS BROADBAND users to split their wireless network into two - an encrypted private one for their own use, and a public one accessible to registered Fon users.

To get started, users need to get one of the company's custom-built wireless routers, register, and plug it into their broadband modem.

It also doubles as a wireless router - and at just \$46, a very cheap one, too.

Once the equipment is plugged in and the Fon software installed, the owner will be able to choose whether to allow other Fon users to use his network for free, or to charge them three euros (S\$6) per day to use it. Fon will track the number of paid logins and administer the collection process, keeping half the proceeds and sending the remainder to the user. For details, visit Fon's site at <http://en.fon.com>

If you let others use it for free, you will gain reciprocal access to the networks of other Fon users around the world.