From Out Here:
How fast is fast enough?

By Jack M. Geller, Ph.D.

Yesterday, my wife and I were at the local market doing the weekly grocery shopping. But while she was attending to the real business at hand, my attention was diverted as I marveled at the amazing amount of detailed information modern food labeling provides. It is truly a testament to consumer information and education. For example, I learned that a half-cup serving of my favorite alphabet soup contained 860 milligrams of sodium, or 36 percent of the daily recommended allowance. Not that it would ever keep me from my favorite soup — but it's nice to know the information is there.

Providing fair and accurate product information is an important principle in this country's economy. The better the product information, the easier it is for consumers to make buying decisions based on information they can trust. So, if you want to buy the cheap stuff, you can, but at least you know what you're getting.

But it isn't always so easy to determine how best to provide such information to the consumer. Take, for example, the telecommunications industry. Today telephone, cable and wireless companies all over the state are marketing Internet services to business and residential customers using terms like "High-Speed," "Broadband" and "Advanced" services. All of these services provide Internet connections at speeds that are much faster than a traditional dial-up modem — and they cost more than dial-up modem service. But how fast must the connection be before it can or should be called "high-speed" or "broadband"?

It's not unlike the issue of labeling in the dairy industry a few years ago. If you recall, over time terms like "low-fat" and "fat-free" became virtually meaningless, as companies used these terms however they wanted. Finally, the government and the dairy industry came together to develop standards consumers could count on. So today "skim milk" means 0-percent fat content and only milk with 0-percent fat can use the terms "skim" or "fat-free." Likewise, "low-fat" is gone as a marketing term and the exact percentage of fat content (e.g., 1 percent or 2 percent) is listed clearly on the label.

Several years ago the Federal Communications Commission defined "broadband" services as having transmission speeds of 200 kilobits per second or faster, both "upstream" (from your computer to the Internet server) and "downstream" (from the Internet server to you). But while this is the FCC definition of broadband, it is not an industry or regulatory standard. In fact,

unlike basic telephone service, broadband Internet services are not regulated at all. So it is up to the telecommunications providers to help the consumer understand how fast is fast.

Now don't get me wrong: I am a big supporter of advanced telecommunications services. I believe the adoption and diffusion of these services are vital to the economic growth and future of rural Minnesota. But, like the dairy industry 10 years ago, there are few standards that define these terms and help consumers compare competing services.

When I review the product marketing information for these advanced services from a variety of telecommunications providers, I find a wide variation in the information and the level of detail provided. Some give the customer a range of connection speeds they can expect, while others provide the minimum or maximum speed a customer can expect. The most common marketing feature, though, compares the speed of the

service to that of a dial-up connection. So phrases such as 8, 11, or even 30 times faster than a dial-up connection are commonly used. But what does that really tell you? To be honest, not much. Even a dial-up connection can vary a lot in speed, depending on your service provider.

To be fair, it is virtually impossible for a telecommunications provider to tell a prospective customer exactly what transmission speed their computer connection will be. There are many factors that come into play: the speed of your service provider's network, the speed of your modem, the processing speed of your computer, whether it's a busy day or busy moment on the network. Last night I conducted several speed tests on the three computers I have connected to my cable modem at home. Each computer recorded a different connection speed, and even multiple tests on the same computer varied. So asking for precision beyond what the industry can provide is unreasonable.

However, recognizing these limitations, telecommunication companies should be able to provide prospective customers with the minimum connection speed they can expect if they subscribe to their high-speed service. Such minimum speed figures are not only reasonable, they can also help consumers better understand the service they are purchasing and can serve as an objective way to compare services from competing providers.

So as we all work to advance the deployment of broadband services to all corners of Minnesota, it's time for the industry to establish some self-imposed standards. Telling potential customers the minimum connection speed they can expect would be a great start.

(*Dr. Geller is President of the Center for Rural Policy and Development at Minnesota State University, Mankato. He can be reached at jack.geller@mnsu.edu.*)