What is a captive portal?

A captive portal is a Web page that the user of a public-access network is obliged to view and interact with before access is granted. Captive portals are typically used by business centers, airports, hotels, shopping plazas, restaurants, coffee shops, and other venues that offer free Wi-Fi hot spots for Internet users.

When a potential user first logs on to a network with a captive portal, a Web page is encountered that requires certain actions before Internet access is granted. A simple captive portal forces the user to at least look at (if not read) an acceptable use policy page, and then click on a button indicating agreement to the terms of the policy. Presumably, this can help absolve the provider from liability in the event the user commits criminal or other destructive activity while logged on.

In some captive portals, advertisements, menus or corporate websites are first displayed to the users. They must click through them (hopefully after reading them) or close the windows in which they appear before accessing the Internet. Some captive portals require the entry of a pre-assigned user ID and password before accessing the Internet.

Even when a simple captive portal is used in a free public-access network, certain people may repeatedly connect, using the network on an almost continuous basis to download music, videos, or other large files. This activity, called bandwidth hogging, can be minimized by additional programming in the captive portal.