

Phone Service Overview

Phone services are both very simple and very complicated. The simple way to look at them is that you have a phone – at your home or your office. It has a number that is unique and that you can give out to anyone who calls it. To make a call, you pick the handset up and dial a number and talk. The only real issue is how much this service costs you.

The complicated way takes into account that the phone call has to go out into the wide world and be connected via switching and networks to all the other phones. How your phone gets connected matters. What kinds of features and services your phone has matters. Who and where you are calling matters. And, yes, price matters.

All of the complexity really comes down to a few options.

911 or emergency service.

It used to be that being able to call 911 was a given. It still is, but the question now arises, how do the emergency services know where you are? People are not always able to or in control of themselves enough to give an address in an emergency and 911 responders try to figure the address out by knowing the calling number. First, mobile phones changed this. Since they are mobile, where is the person calling from? But eventually they figured out a way to triangulate and figure out a mobile phone's location within about fifty feet or so. Now with internet and other phones, the problem arises again, how do you know the phone's location? The answer is that a third system for identifying calls was added in, e911, which gets anyone registering a VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) or internet phone to put the phone's home location in a database when they sign up. Although this isn't perfect, it is a lot better than nothing. But even so, some internet-based calling services do not (and cannot) offer 911 services – so that's the first thing to look out for.

Voicemail

Voicemail is a hot button topic. Some people hate it, some people love it. Voicemail is really just a fancy form of answering machine where instead of having a physical answering machine in your house, there is a computer-based answering machine that you can reach from your telephone by pushing a special button or calling a special number. But not all services offer voicemail and nowadays there are lots of extra add-ons that can make voicemail more flexible. The commonest is voicemail to email, where all messages left for you automatically get put in an email and sent to you. The advantage is that you can get them even when on a trip and also you have a way of saving them if you need to.

Fax Machines

Even with the advent of email and PDF files and all kinds of paper-saving ideas, the fax machine is

more commonly used than ever. But modern phones systems and fax machines do not always get along. Because they both use digital signals but produced in different ways, some new phone systems have trouble transmitting and receiving fax signals. There is only one way to be sure if you really need fax support. Ask. And don't forget to ask if it costs extra, because it often does.

International Calls

International calls are one of the nicest things about new phone systems. That's because international calls are usually REALLY cheap on modern phone systems. Forget 45 cents a minute to Europe or even 16 cents a minute. Some are FREE and most cost well under ten cents a minute to most international destinations. And if you call a particular country a lot you can often get an even better deal just for that country.

Keep Your Current Number

Mostly, when changing phone services, people would ideally like to keep their current phone number. Once that was pretty difficult but nowadays it is very straightforward except for the PC-based phone systems. Why is that? PC-based phone systems don't actually give you a phone number at all in many cases, and if they do, it has to come from a pretty restricted group of numbers that is specially designated. So why would you want a PC-based phone service? Well the simple answer is price. Several of them are free – completely free – and the others are very very cheap.

Who Supplies Your Phone Service?

Although this shouldn't matter in an ideal world, in practice it makes a great deal of difference to one thing – price. Here is the bottom line. Old fashioned phone companies are now the most expensive option but also mostly the most reliable. Cable or DSL or other broadband companies are the next most costly, unless you 'bundle' services from them and buy internet access, phone service and TV from them altogether. Then the phone part becomes very cheap. Specialist VoIP phone companies are the cheapest option that gives you phone that works exactly the way you expect, with your own number and everything. They also offer more features and services than any other option. PC-based services that don't even use a telephone handset are the cheapest – sometimes free – but mostly provide the fewest services.