

Wireless Phones



Wireless technology allows users to make and receive telephone calls virtually anywhere they go, within wireless coverage areas. While wireless phones offer convenience, many customers have been surprised by unexpected charges.

Here are some things you should know if you are considering purchasing a wireless phone or changing your service:

Saving on airtime charges

People use their wireless phones in different ways. Some people travel and need their phone on the road and others never leave their home service area. Some people use their phones for a few minutes a day and others for hours a day. Match a plan to your needs and budget, because it may be hard to change once you're signed up.

Get a good deal to begin with. Comparison shopping can help you find a service plan and phone that fit your needs. Look for promotions.

Estimate your usage before signing up. Remember that under most plans you're paying for calls you get as well as those you make. Minutes over the limit in your calling plan are much more costly.

Evaluate your needs before signing up for extra-cost calling services such as call waiting, three-way calling, caller ID and call forwarding. Some plans may include these services at no additional charge.

If you're cut off during a call, or couldn't hear the person on the other end, call your carrier at 611 or *611 and ask for a billing credit for that call. Under Wisconsin law, a wireless provider cannot charge you for an incomplete call.

Some consumers may qualify for a lower-cost calling plan if they are low-income, members of an association or employed by a certain company.

If your calling plan is not working for your calling needs, ask your provider if there is another plan which would be better for you. Most providers have numerous options, and many companies are willing to make changes from one plan to another for free.

Other Factors to Consider

Call quality: Some carriers may provide better reception and fewer dropped calls than others. Ask other wireless phone users in your community about the quality of their calls.

Service area: Which plan gives you the largest calling area? If you travel frequently, a larger service area can save you plenty.

Free incoming calls: Some carriers don't charge you for the first minute of incoming calls. If you receive a lot of those calls, this could save you a lot.

Billing by the second: A few carriers bill you by the second after the first minute of a call, rather than rounding your calls to the next full minute. Again, the savings can be significant.

Night and weekend vs. anytime calling: Plans with more anytime minutes or longer night and weekend calling periods are more attractive. For example, while one plan may start free night calling at 9pm, others may start at 7pm, included in the plan cost or for an extra fee. Consider which plan fits your calling patterns best.

Included services: Many plans offer free voice mail, but some offer other useful services, such as text messages or data transmission capabilities.

Cancellation fees: Look for the smallest penalty for changing carriers.

The Prepaid Option

Prepaid wireless plans are popular with people who don't want long-term contracts, want to strictly control their spending, use their phone sparingly, or have bad credit. With prepaid wireless, a consumer buys blocks of calling minutes or a month of service at a time. The user has no long term contract or credit commitment to the carrier and no monthly statement. You simply use your phone until the prepaid amount is used up or the period ends. New blocks or periods of usage can be purchased at any time.

The prepaid blocks of usage can cost significantly more per minute of use and some carriers require a minimum spending level per month. Prepaid buyers usually, but not always, pay full retail price for the wireless phone. Still, prepaid wireless works well for many.

Questions & Answers

What kinds of charges will I see on my bill?

In addition to your monthly service charge, and fees for any airtime used over and above your plan's included minutes, you may see charges for any roaming, long-distance or directory assistance calls you make. You may also see federal, state, county or city taxes on your bill, as well as miscellaneous charges, such as a universal service fund charge.

What is roaming?

“Roaming” allows customers to use their phones to place and receive calls in cities outside their “home” service areas. This feature is useful when traveling outside your home coverage area. Each provider offers different home coverage areas. There is sometimes an additional charge for roaming, in addition to long distance charges. Roaming charges can be quite high. To avoid roaming charges, look for companies that offer nationwide calling areas.

Should I sign a long-term contract?

Many wireless plans require you to sign a long-term contract for the service and/or the equipment. Think carefully before you sign. While carriers usually offer better deals if you sign a long-term contract, there are disadvantages:

You may not be able to switch providers or cancel service until the contract expiration, unless you pay a cancellation fee, which can often be hundreds.

If wireless prices drop, you may be tied into a fixed price.

How do I pick a carrier with the best reception?

Reception varies inside a carrier's coverage area because of obstructions such as buildings, tunnels, and hills, and the number and placement of wireless towers. Ask your friends and neighbors who have wireless service for their opinions about carriers' coverage and call quality. Ask the provider about signal coverage in the areas you frequent and about the reception strength of various handsets.

Can someone fraudulently use my cellular phone?

Your cellular phone can be used fraudulently if someone “clones” the electronic serial number of your phone and uses it to place unauthorized calls without intention of payment. “Cloning” is prohibited by the Federal Communications Commission and can be prevented in the authentication process that occurs after you first purchase your phone. Ask your carrier what steps it takes to protect your phone from cloning.

Can I use my existing phone with a new carrier?

Sometimes you can activate your phone with another carrier. It will depend on whether the technology your phone uses is compatible with your chosen carrier's technology, and whether the carrier chooses to activate that specific phone on its network. Some carriers will activate a phone only if you buy it from them. The best way to find out is to call the carrier.

What's the best service plan for frequent travel in the United States?

People who travel frequently should check out the many nation-wide plans carriers offer. The monthly fee includes minutes with no long-distance or roaming charges, but sometimes with restrictions. For high usage frequent travelers, many providers offer flat-rate (unlimited calling) plans in regional and national versions, so compare them to find the one that's best for you..

Can I use my phone outside the United States?

Some wireless phones will work in some or all foreign countries, while others may not. Check with your carrier before traveling abroad.

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