

Choosing the Right Telephone Provider and Service Options



The Choice is Yours...

- How do you know which providers offer local and long distance service in your area?
- What is important to consider in choosing a provider?
- Should you switch to a wireless or voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) provider?
- Should you choose one provider for local, long distance, Internet, and cable television or a different provider for each service?
- What are your choices if you just want the basics?

1. Think about what you need.

Think about or make a list of the features and services you will use such as call waiting, caller ID, voice mail, access to the Internet, or the ability to call without usage fees. It may be helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- What special features do I already use and how much do they cost?
- Am I paying for features or services I do not use?
- Where and when do I usually call?
- What other services do I want (wireless phone, cable television, Internet, etc.)?

2. Choose the type of provider that best fits your needs.

Telephone service can come from several *types* of providers. Traditional switched telephone service is provided by wire or cable, and typically is called “wireline” service. Cellular service is a mobile, or “wireless” service. VoIP telephone services require a broadband connection, such as DSL or cable modem.

To find out what providers serve your area, you can:

- Review advertisements mailed to your home or business.
- Call a provider directly to find out if it offers service in your area.
- Ask friends or relatives about the provider they use.
- Check with your current local telephone provider to see if it maintains a list of providers that serve your area.
- See the section below titled “Tips for Locating Specific Types of Providers” for further information.

3. Consider the combinations.

Many providers now offer the option to purchase local, long distance, wireless, Internet and cable or satellite (dish) services. Combining these services could save you money and offer the convenience of one bill.

4. Compare plans.

Shop around and compare prices for services that include only the specific features you identified in number 1 above. Most providers offer a variety of calling plans and feature packages. Keep in mind that sometimes a package with more features than you need may be cheaper than purchasing only the individual services you want. You can call the provider or you may be able to find rate information on the provider’s website. Be sure to ask the following questions:

- What is the monthly fee and what does it include?
- Are usage rates the same regardless of the time of day and the location you are calling to and from?
- Are there additional costs such as a, minimum bill or a Universal Service Fund fee? (Some of these fees are the same from provider to provider, and some are different.)
- Is there an installation charge? Is there any other fee that applies for switching providers?
- Is there a contract period or early termination penalty for your current and/or new provider?
- Does the plan include the features and services you have identified above?

Tips for Locating Specific Types of Providers

For wireline providers, you can

- Check the Commission’s local service provider web page at <http://psc.wi.gov/apps40/teleprovider/default.aspx>
- Check the front pages of your phone book for a list of competing local service providers.
- Check the Yellow Pages under “Telephone Companies.”

Many areas have two or more competing wireline providers. In some areas, competition is permitted but no competing provider has yet decided to enter that market. Wireline providers often offer packages or bundles of telephone and other services. Wireline providers may also allow you to choose your long distance provider, which is usually not the case with wireless or VoIP providers.

For wireless providers, you can

- Check the Yellow Pages under “Cellular & PCS Providers.”

Most of Wisconsin is served by a number of different wireless providers; however the quality of the signal varies. When choosing wireless service, especially in rural areas, check whether the provider has a good signal in the areas in which you will frequently use your phone. Also make sure the provider’s network includes coverage in areas to which you may frequently travel. To do this, you can:

- ✓ Ask others in your community.
- ✓ See comments from people in your community on the web at <http://www.cellreception.com/coverage/wi/>.
- ✓ Take advantage of a risk-free trial period, if the provider offers one.
- ✓ Look over the provider brochures very carefully and ask questions.

For more information on wireless service, please refer to the PSC’s brochure on Wireless Phones. It is available on the PSC’s website (<http://psc.wi.gov/thelibrary/publications/tele/telecom03.pdf>) or by contacting the PSC using the contact information at the end of this brochure.

For more information on VoIP providers, you can

- Search the web for VoIP providers.

VoIP service providers operate over your existing broadband connection. If you do not have a broadband connection, or if you cancel that service, VoIP services will not work.

Taking Your Phone Number Along

You may be able to change providers without changing your telephone number – but not in all cases. In some instances, you will be able to move your number over to a new provider, but not be able to move it away again. Generally, you should be able to move numbers away from a traditional wireline provider to any competitor, or to and from most wireless providers. VoIP providers are also supposed to participate in the processes that permit customers to “move” their phone numbers; however; there are still instances where customers are experiencing trouble moving numbers away from VoIP providers or between newer competitors.

Make sure to call your new provider and ask to keep your phone number **before** cancelling your old service. In order to “port” your phone number to another provider, your phone number must be associated with active phone service. This ability to take your phone number to a new provider is for customers who are staying in the same location.

After the Change

Once you have changed providers, you need to take one more step. Once you are sure that your new service is active, you should contact your old provider and make sure that they know you have left. More importantly, you need to make sure that they will stop billing you.

Long Distance Service

Customers of most wireline providers are able to choose between long distance companies. While some people use a traditional phone company for their long distance calls, other take advantage of wireless national calling plans, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), dial-around providers or pre-paid calling cards.

Some customers find it convenient to have the same provider for both local and long distance service, but it is possible to have different providers for these services. Different providers package and price long distance service differently. For example, some providers charge a flat package rate for unlimited calling. Other providers may charge different rates for long distance calls within the state (intrastate) than for calls between states (interstate). In some instances, the long distance rates are higher for in-state calls than for calls to out-of-state locations.

Service Considerations

Traditional telephone service is connected to your home over a copper wire and operates using power supplied by the telephone company over the wires. This allows a traditional telephone to operate on the line even during a power outage in your home.

Cordless and other phones that must be plugged into an electric outlet will not operate during a power outage; but you can still make calls using a traditional phone.

If you are using non-traditional phone service, check with your provider when your home power fails.

Telephone Service via the Internet (VoIP)

Some telephone service providers, such as Vonage and Skype, transmit calls over the public Internet. These providers are generally called “VoIP providers.” VoIP means Voice over Internet Protocol, a technology which is actually used by a number of providers, but other providers generally use their own, dedicated networks, instead of the Internet itself. Using the Internet has some advantages and disadvantages.

One primary advantage of using the Internet is price. Since VoIP providers do not build their own networks, they have lower costs, and can provide service – particularly interstate or international service – at lower prices. The downside of VoIP providers using the public Internet is that their quality may be lower, since heavy usage on the public Internet can garble voice traffic.

You must also have a high-speed connection to the Internet to use a VoIP provider. If your high-speed connection is not working – whether due to power failure, network outages or any other reason – you cannot make calls using a VoIP provider.

Most VoIP providers do use telephone numbers, but those numbers are obtained in non-traditional ways. This means that you could have, for instance, a New York number for your Wisconsin service. You may also keep your current number when moving to a VoIP provider, but may have difficulty keeping that number if you move away from a VoIP provider to another provider.

Most VoIP providers generally do provide some form of emergency access, possibly including 9-1-1. However, not all VoIP providers can make all parts of 9-1-1 (for example, the automatic location functions) work.

The technology used by VoIP providers allows them to offer some services (such as having a phone number usually associated with another area) not provided by traditional telephone providers. Conversely, VoIP providers may not offer some services (such as directories, directory listings, operator services, etc.) offered by traditional providers.

At present, VoIP providers are not regulated, and are not subject to the same rules and regulations that apply to other telephone providers. VoIP providers do not have to provide Life-line and Link-up services to low income customers, and are not bound by the same rules on disconnections, late payment charges and payment arrangements, etc.

There are some providers of VoIP services that do not interconnect to the public switched network. They can only be used to talk with other users of that same provider. These providers may not have traditional telephone numbers and their services cannot be used to call 9-1-1 or other numbers not subscribed to their service.

Pre-paid Calling Cards

A pre-paid calling card may be an economical alternative for long distance calling, especially if you do not have a long distance carrier, if you make many calls away from home or regularly make international calls. As with any long distance service, savings depend on the rates charged. The listed rates generally apply to interstate calls – intrastate and international calls may cost more. It is also important to read the fine print: charges may apply for incomplete calls, other unexpected fees may be imposed, and cards may expire without notice.

Online Resources

Local Service Competitors in Wisconsin (<http://psc.wi.gov/apps40/teleprovider/default.aspx>)

The PSC maintains an interactive map-based web resource that lists which providers offer local service in each Wisconsin community.

A Bell Tolls (www.abtolls.com)

Independent comparison of over 100 calling plans for in-state, state-to-state, and international calls.

Telecommunications Research and Action Center (TRAC) (www.trac.org)

Consumer organization TRAC provides advice regarding shopping for phone service.

Connect My Phone (www.connectmyphone.com)

Compare phone companies that service your area to find one that matches all your needs and budget.

Save On Phone (www.saveonphone.com)

Provides a rate calculator and comparison of low-cost long distance plans for in-state and state-to-state calls.

Frequently Asked Questions:

Q: Does it cost any money to change local phone companies?

A: Most companies charge an installation fee to change your local phone company, although some companies will agree to waive this fee.

Q: Does it cost any money to change long distance companies?

A: Most, if not all, local telephone companies charge a fee to change your long distance company; call your local company to find out what the fee is. Your new long distance company may agree to reimburse you for this charge if you ask, but they don't have to.

Q: Do I have to choose a Long Distance Provider?

A: No. You can choose not to have a presubscribed carrier – at least for wireline service – but callers can still dial – and complete - long distance calls from your phone. Such calls would be completed using the default provider, and high charges may apply. To prevent outgoing long distance calls, you need to contact your local service provider to request a toll block. You can also have other services – such as 900 service – blocked.

Q: Would my service be better or worse if I change companies?

A: This varies by company. All providers must meet minimal technical standards, but service quality can still vary. Some other important considerations may be how quickly a company answers phone calls from its customers, how easily you can reach a live service representative, and how quickly service changes or problems are resolved.

Q: How do prices compare between companies?

A: Depending on what optional features you need, a competitor's prices may be higher or lower than what you are currently paying. Often you can get a better deal from another provider if that provider is offering a special promotion. If you subscribe to a promotional offering keep in mind that higher rates will likely take effect when the promotional period ends. You may also gain some advantage if you buy a combination or package of services. For example, local service may be combined with one or more of the following: long distance, Internet, TV or cellular service, or custom calling features such as call waiting and caller identification. Of course, these are not a bargain if they include features you do not need.

Q: Will I be required to enter into a contract for local telephone service?

A: A provider may ask you to agree to a contract period, either verbally or in writing. Often contracts are required to obtain lower rates or special packages. If you discontinue service before the contract period ends you could be charged an additional fee. As always, consider carefully before you agree to or sign anything.

Q: Can a provider require me to buy its local phone service if I just want Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) service?

A: Yes, but not all do. Some companies, including AT&T and Verizon, have begun to offer DSL service by itself without having to buy voice phone service from that company. Other companies still require you to purchase voice service if you want their DSL.

The Public Service Commission of Wisconsin is an independent state agency that oversees more than 1,300 Wisconsin public utilities that provide natural gas, electricity, heat, steam, water and telecommunications services.



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