

How to select your telecom company

(or at least a pretty good idea of what to look for)

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So you're starting or expanding your business. Congratulations!

That tells us chances are you've got about as much time to devote to researching communications options as you have to catch an afternoon nap: Pretty much none.

So we'll make this a bit easier by compartmentalizing.

- We've got an introduction that explains general concepts in telecom products and offers some tips for choosing a provider. Take a look before the sales representative calls or stops by..... (page 3)
- A section on Internet and data services helps you determine what you need for keeping your business connected for email, web access, site hosting and more..... (page 5)
- A section on voice and phone services demystifies a fast-changing environment. Especially important if it's been a while since you've ordered phone service..... (page 7)
- Like many businesses, you may be interested in piping television into your retail establishment or office. Here's some background on business video services..... (page 9)
- If you're got multiple locations and a thirst for serious speed, Business Ethernet or fiber connectivity may be your ticket. Find out more.... (page 10)
- We're on a quest to help de-mystify the business telecommunications. Stroll through our glossary for quick, understandable explanations of technology terms.

As your business grows and your communication and networking needs expand along with it, keep this site in mind. We'd love to see you here again. And in the meantime, may your phones ring, your inbox buzz, and your profits soar.

CHOOSING A COMMUNICATIONS PROVIDER

They're out there in number. Familiar names, newcomers to the market, independent agents that broker OPN (other people's networks) and more. Deregulation and lowered costs of entry – a welcome byproduct of recent technology advances – have widened the pool of companies offering to deliver communications services to your business. Most fall into these categories:

- Voice. The telephone equipment and associated network connectivity that distributes calls and messages to and from your office, retail store or place of business.
- Internet. High-speed data connections and related services that get you online, let you use e-mail, conduct e-commerce transactions, store data and more.
- Video. Televised entertainment and information services that entertain customers, keep employees informed and offer transactional revenue opportunities for hotels and others.
- Ethernet and fiber networks. Dedicated data connections that accommodate large volumes of data at high speeds to support reliable file transfer between business locations.

But there are significant differences among providers that can affect your satisfaction, and some fundamental qualities you may want to bear in mind as you make important decisions about keeping your business connected. Here are a few:

Is it available? We know: It seems like a strange question. But because of variations in geographic coverage, not all communications services are available in all business locations. When you talk to a provider, make sure to ask whether your business addresses are serviceable, or check your provider's website for online tools that may allow you to determine service availability on the spot.

Who's (really) providing the service? Make sure you understand where your connectivity comes from. If you're dealing directly with a facilities-based provider, there's no question here. The company that owns and maintains the network is the same company that ultimately delivers the service. At the same time, there are many excellent advisors and agents that can help you sort through options and make recommendations for you. If you work with one, it's important to ask what network and technology facilities they're recommending. Finally, most markets feature several resellers that lease or rent capacity from underlying network providers. In any event, you'll be armed with the facts if you make sure to ask who provides the actual network facility that will handle your communications traffic.

How reliable is your provider? The last thing you need is a dead voice line or a data network that goes dark just when you're about to complete a transaction or send a critical document. Reliability is key. Ask other business owners about their experience and recommendations, and check independent sources like the Better Business Bureau or your local Chamber of Commerce.

Is the company familiar? Just like buying office equipment or business insurance, it's wise to go with a trusted name. Is the telecommunications company that will handle your critical business communications a well-known presence? Do you recognize the brand? Do other businesses or residential customers use the same company?

Can you bundle it up? Some of the best deals out there today come in the form of service bundles that offer attractive discounts on the purchase of multiple services or products. Common examples include voice-plus-Internet; voice, Internet and TV; or voice and TV packages. Also, some companies include value-add extras like business software, anti-virus tools and more. Significant savings may be available depending on your provider and package. Make sure to ask.

Can you manage your own account? Access to online account management tools can be a big differentiator among companies. Ask whether your company maintains an online portal that enables you to upgrade or change services, find out answers to common questions and more, all with just a few clicks.

Is there a local presence? Personalized service is important to many business owners, and not every provider maintains local contacts for product information, installation, sales and support. Although it's less expensive for providers to centralize support functions in distant service centers, it's not always the best solution for your business. Ask about local presence and support before you find you're without either.

How will you be supported? Business never really stops. Your connectivity shouldn't, either. Insist on 24x7 support, and make sure your provider can offer it through live phone contact plus online tools. Also ask about service or repair escalation procedures, and find out whether a call to the service line will be answered promptly – by calling it.

What's the upgrade path? Does your provider offer a progression of services that will grow along with your business? Check in advance before locking into a voice plan that caps out at a few lines, or buying a one-size-fits-all Internet service. Varying service tiers that let you select an appropriate price point and leave you leeway to upgrade later may be welcome.

PLUG IN TO A BETTER WAY OF DOING BUSINESS

Whatever business you're in, your business demands an online presence. Whether you're selling merchandise online, emailing invoices to customers, updating your company's Facebook page or zinging large data files to an office across town, being in business means staying connected, reliably and continually.

The good news is that a wealth of choice exists for businesses to go online. From basic Internet connectivity to dedicated Ethernet or fiber optic links, a variety of services and providers are available to plug your business into the modern era. Add-on services like website hosting, offsite data storage and data security round out the picture.

Here are some of the core products you may want to consider for your business's Internet presence:

High-speed Internet. Just as the name suggests, it's an always-on connection that delivers Internet traffic to the computers and other connected devices your business uses. This critical connection delivers everything from simple emails to large file downloads. Here, speed and reliability are the main considerations. Look for a provider that offers multiple tiers of service, so you can select the ideal combination of performance and price.

Web hosting. Your website needs to live on a high-capacity computer server that's capable of responding to user requests flawlessly. In the early days of the commercial Internet, specialized web-hosting companies usually provided this service. Now, cable companies and telecommunications providers make it part of their offering, allowing you a one-stop resource.

Offsite data storage. Repeat after us: thou shalt not leave your critical business data at risk of loss. Back it up offsite using a commercial data backup provider (a Google query will turn up several) or ask your cable/telecom provider for suggestions. And breathe a little easier.

Virtual private network. Sounds like the stuff of serious cyber-intrigue, but it's actually just a simple way to connect to your company's server and network without being in the office. If the commute to the office looks nasty or you forgot to grab a file to work on over the weekend, just fire up your VPN connection. Here again, many cable/telecom providers can integrate a VPN into your Internet package.

Data security. Protecting your business from sinister data viruses and other forms of malware used to require buying and installing your own software. Not so much anymore. Ask your provider about integration of data protection and security features with your Internet service.

Mobile connectivity. You're not always in the office, are you? While you're setting up your business communications systems, ask whether the same

company that delivers your phone lines and data networks can also help with mobile broadband or even mobile phone service. You might save some money with a discounted bundle as you gain some convenience.

And a wee bit of history...

It's a good time to be in business. Today businesses of all sizes – from one-person shops to large enterprises – have unprecedented access to sophisticated Internet connectivity and networking services at affordable prices.

That hasn't always been the case. Early in the Internet's development, businesses relied mainly on incumbent telephone companies to supply basic Internet connectivity, ranging from humble dial-up access over phone lines to expensive T1 lines that maxed out at fixed data rates.

That has changed dramatically. Deregulation and technology advancements have introduced new players, with cable companies – once known mainly for delivering residential cable TV service – making a profound impact. Thanks to large investments in broadband network infrastructure, cable companies have emerged as prominent providers of business Internet services, web hosting and more.

WHERE BUSINESS FINDS ITS VOICE

Even in the age of Twitter, the art of live conversation remains a vital part of doing business.

It's just that today, the trusty business telephone has added a bagful of tricks, like voice mails over the Internet, group message delivery, digital call clarity and even emerging technologies like HD voice. Also new to the picture: a wider range of providers. The days of a single phone company are long gone. Competitive entrants including your local cable company are driving competition and innovation in business phone service, and attractive deals are available to businesses of all sizes.

As you set up or expand your business, here are some phone products and features you should consider:

Enough capacity. How many phone lines will you need? It depends on your business. If you're a solo entrepreneur, one line probably is plenty. Traditional office environments for small businesses usually have several lines. And companies with extremely high call volume, like outbound telemarketing businesses, are good candidates for Voice Trunk services that offer scalable connectivity over dedicated phone lines to office PBXs.

Attractive calling plans. Look for unlimited local calling and competitive rates for long-distance calls. Actually, don't just look for them: Demand them.

Number preservation. Even if you've been tied to the same phone company for years, you can switch to a cable or alternative provider without having to change your phone numbers. Number preservation (or "portability") allows you to keep your existing numbers even when changing from your current phone provider to cable or another phone service.

Feature sets. Make sure your provider can accommodate the business phone features you may need, like voice mail, message waiting indication, 3-way calling, caller ID and remote number forwarding before you set up service.

Managed networks. Big distinction here. If your business calls are important (duh), consider carefully before committing to a low-cost phone service that delivers calls over the public Internet. In some cases, they work reliably, but frustrations also are common. The more reliable approach is to select a phone service that routes your calls over a managed facilities-based voice network – meaning the lines are maintained by your provider, and your calls enjoy prioritization that keeps the signal crystal-clear. Cable companies, for example, deliver phone service over their own managed networks, not the public Internet. Ask your representative, and be careful in evaluating Internet phone service.

Alarm compatibility. Check with your alarm provider to ensure the phone service your considering is compatible with any security alarms your business may use. Not every phone service is. The cable industry has worked closely with

alarm companies to assure compatibility with alarm systems, and the National Fire Protection Association has redefined its alarm specifications to affirm that cable phone service is compatible with fire alarm requirements.

VIDEO GETS DOWN TO BUSINESS

It's not just for couch potatoes anymore. Television is speaking the language of business for a growing number of companies. Banks, auto repair shops, dentistry practices and other businesses are installing cable-connected TV monitors to entertain customers while they wait. Many professional offices are outfitted with television in break rooms and offices, where managers stay plugged in to business news from channels like CNBC, Bloomberg Television and FOX Business. Hotels are entertaining guests with cable channels and On Demand choices, room by room. Restaurants, salons and bars have made television a common part of their patron experience. And many solo entrepreneurs and home-based business owners find television helps to keep them connected to the outside world.

If you're considering adding a television service for your business, here are some ideas that may help:

Think bundle. You'll pay less if you set up television service from the same company that delivers other business communications services, like Internet connectivity and business voice. If your current phone/Internet provider doesn't offer video –many don't – you may be in line for significant savings if you select or switch to a bundled provider.

Look up. For restaurants and retail or service businesses, the best place to affix a television monitor is usually above eye-level, in a wall- or ceiling-mounted location. It reduces the temptation for customers to fiddle with volume and channel selection, and it keeps your monitors out of harms' way.

Go HD. Impressive picture quality dresses up your establishment or your office and sends a message about professionalism and taste. Ask your provider about digital high-definition video packages that include the channels you want to watch or display.

Get demanding. On Demand television services give you (and your patrons) easy access to movies and TV shows they want to watch – plus the ability to pause, rewind and fast-forward at will.

Improve profits. Hotel and lodging providers often can reduce expenses and enhance profit margins by replacing in-house video networks with managed cable television services that feature secure On Demand access and competitive rates for traditional television channels.

And don't forget...

Cable television providers also offer a wealth of digital music channels that may be perfect for setting the mood and enhancing the ambiance at your place of business. Select a commercial-free, around-the-clock music channel offering elegant, crystal-clear digital sound, connect it to your audio system, and enjoy.

LINE UP A PATHWAY TO GROWTH

Dedicated Ethernet or fiber networks are a secure, private data networks just for your business, and they're particularly well-suited for businesses with multiple locations. Variations of Ethernet include Ethernet Network services, Ethernet Virtual Private Line and Ethernet Dedicated Internet.

Companies that handle large amounts of data – medical imaging files, large data archives and video are common applications – use Ethernet and dedicated fiber capacity to tie together their offices and facilities with rapid-fire connections.

If you fall into the category, look for flexibility from your provider, rather than a one-size-fits-all solution. For example, MEF-compliant Ethernet delivers

guaranteed data rates, but unlike legacy T1 lines, you can choose the performance that suits your needs, and add speed and capacity as your business grows. As you consider Ethernet connectivity, make sure your service provider is compliant with Metro Ethernet Forum standards.

Here are some things to think about as you consider adding Ethernet or leasing dedicated fiber lines:

Saving money. Ethernet services make sense for many businesses that want power, speed and ubiquitous connectivity without the need to invest their own capital for routers, switches and hardware. In almost all instances, private Ethernet is a cost-saving alternative to legacy data networks such as ATM and Frame Relay. If your business uses an older networking approach, it may be time to switch. Similar benefits are available through dedicated fiber optic lines that power your business with tremendous speed for large file transfers and data archiving.

How fast? Make sure your provider offers a range of choice for bandwidth – the raw throughput of your connection – and scalability. Many Ethernet services offer a range of speeds that can be tailored for your business. The right choice depends on a blend of your data requirements and budget. Your representative should be able to help you calculate the optimal solution.

Productivity and teamwork. Ethernet or fiber networks effectively widen your local area network by extending its reach to a separate location, with no degradation of access or efficiency. If your business involves more than one location – a business office and a warehouse, for instance – a dedicated Ethernet or fiber connection may be the perfect way to achieve new synergy. If you're considering a direct fiber connection, look for a provider that offers a robust portfolio of services enabling point-to-point or point-to-multipoint services.

Monitoring. Ask your provider about advanced monitoring tools that give you visibility into your network's performance.

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