

Plugged or Unplugged  
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Years ago the home telephone consisted of an operator in the center of town with a large board consisting of cables to plug and unplug depending on who needed to talk to whom. The picture that comes to mind is Lily Tomlin! After that came the rotary phone with an automatic switch in the phone company main building. Wow, then there was the touch tone phone. However, some outlying areas only had the ability to produce rotary dial (or pulse) service. So telephones in the stores had the option for tone or pulse. Today it is unusual to find a phone that has a "pulse" feature, not to mention hard to find a home phone that doesn't have speakerphone, voice mail, call waiting, caller id and the list goes on and on.

The typical home owner has gone from one and only choice for their home telephone to so many choices it makes one's mind spin. As a business consultant in the telecommunications field I am often asked to evaluate the best phone system or features for a client. This often involves weighing the pros and cons of multiple vendors and manufacturers. Furthermore, each of those systems offers a specific feature set or a specific look of a telephone set. It is a matter of what features and functions work best for that customer. Choosing a home telephone and service is no different. One must look at function and fit.

There are several options available in the marketplace today. Option one is the local phone company using standard telephone line to the house.

PROS:

- Still the most reliable means of communication today
- Not dependent upon AC power to function – even if a cordless phone is used it can be unplugged and a plain old telephone put in its place during a power outage immediately restoring the link to the phone company
- Most locations are tied directly to the 911 service center ensuring that when a "9-1-1" call is placed the authorities are directed to the exact address even if the caller can't reply in words where they are located
- All in one plans give the appearance of no long distance fees

CONS:

- Expensive base line cost
- Most features above dial tone are extra costs (caller ID, call waiting, call forwarding, three way calling, voice mail)
- Only one provider of this type of service so due to the reliability there is little or no effort to stay competitive with respect to cost as well as customer service.
- All in one plans may inflate cost if the user does not make many long distance calls.

Option two is cell phone service that functions as both remote and home service.

PROS:

- Reduce monthly expenses – by disconnecting the home phone a home owner can eliminate an average of \$35.00 - \$40.00/month
- Take advantage of competitive calling plans many of which offer free night and weekend calling minutes or free cell to cell minutes
- The home phone goes with the home owner everywhere they go

- Built in extra features such as caller ID, voice mail, three way calling, and more.

CONS:

- There is now only one phone in the house. Unless the phone is carried around everywhere it is hard to get to the phone before the caller is transferred to voice mail.
- No more family party lines grabbing every available phone to talk to Great Grandma. The only option here would be a cell phone with a speaker.
- In a family environment the parent must make sure there is at least one spare phone to leave when they are gone. There is no way that a child and a babysitter or even another family member can be left alone in the house without a telephone for emergencies.
- When a "9-1-1" call is placed the service center often can track to the nearest cell phone tower but not to the exact location of the telephone itself. I had a friend of mine test this when she disconnected her home phone and moved her number to her cell phone carrier. After placing her "9-1-1" call she was told the city she was in but the operator could not tell what address or even cross street that she was calling from. My only advice on this is check with the cell provider and determine the importance of their answer if they do not provide tracking to the exact location of the original call.

Option three is IP telephone service. I am guessing that there are many readers that have heard the catchy jingle of the Vonage IP telephone service. While that is a national provider there are several local providers coming onboard with similar service offerings.

PROS:

- Cost Effective – from \$9.95/month with per minute call charges to \$29.95 unlimited calling.
- Feature rich – ability to utilize the internet to manage phone service features by a click of the mouse, forward your number, have simultaneous ringing on home phones and cell phones
- Can use the same phones that were connected to the old fashioned telephone company.
- Can travel with the phone and have all calls follow. Let's play a scenario. I go on vacation to Florida, taking my IP phone with me, log into the hotel's high speed internet connection, I am now able to make calls to my home town as if I was local.

CONS:

- Must have high speed internet access – this is often difficult in certain geographic areas
- When the internet goes down, so does the phone service. However, most service providers offer an immediate re-direct to another telephone number such as a cell phone.
- While "9-1-1" is offered it is programmed through the recognition of the IP address of the user. It is not currently the E-9-1-1 service of the local telephone company and should not be considered fool-proof.

Before making a choice of which path to go in this wide open marketplace a home owner must make an assessment of priorities. Looking at the CONS of the cell phone and IP phone service options may be completely inconsequential to one home owner but monumental to another. Most important is be an informed buyer, ask questions and

ensure that you have all of the information necessary to make the right choice for your family.