



Telephone Service Options

With several telephone service options available to stay in touch with friends and family, making an informed decision about which service and provider to use is important. The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) wants to make sure residential consumers know about all of their options when choosing a telephone provider.

Local Telephone Providers

There may be several options available when deciding which company you want to provide your local telephone service. Most companies have several telephone service packages available that include Caller ID, Call Waiting and voicemail. Consumers may also be able to sign up for basic local telephone service and pick and choose extras that are needed.

If you decide to switch your service provider and your new service does not include long-distance service, it is important to advise your current long-distance provider of the change to make sure your long-distance plan will transfer. It is also crucial not to cancel your current local service as most companies cannot pick you up as a customer if you are not already with a local provider.

Cell Phone Service

Cellular telephone service has become an increasingly popular way for residential consumers to stay connected whenever and wherever they want. Cell phone providers usually offer service in three types of calling plans – local, regional and national. Each type has a specific calling area where you can make and receive calls using a set amount of minutes in the plan. Calls made outside of a provider's calling area, or network, could accrue "roaming" charges. In these instances, roaming charges along with connection fees may apply.

Many cell phone providers also include features like Caller ID, Call Waiting, 3-Way Calling, Call Forwarding and Voicemail in their various calling plans. Be sure to ask if these features carry any additional charges.

Cell phone plans have agreements that typically last one or two years. If you decide to terminate the agreement early, you will most likely pay a substantial cancellation fee.

If you decide to switch from one cell phone company to another, you do have the option to keep your telephone number. You may need to change it if you move to a different metropolitan

area.

Not all areas in Ohio have cell phone coverage. Check coverage maps in the areas you want to use the service before making a decision to sign up for a cell phone plan. You should also talk to a company representative to check on coverage areas.

Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP)

Customers with high-speed broadband Internet access have the option of local and long-distance telephone service that could provide cost savings. Voice over Internet Protocol, or VoIP, allows phone calls to go over broadband lines. There is special equipment needed to make and receive calls using VoIP technology.



Consumers who choose VoIP for their telephone service should be aware that it may not work during a power outage. Enhanced 9-1-1 service is not always available with VoIP service either. Problems with your computer, broadband connection or VoIP equipment also may affect the ability to make and receive calls.

Cable telephone service also may be available without having a broadband service connection.

The option to have telephone service using a cable company's infrastructure to connect to a telephone company's infrastructure is available without high-speed broadband Internet access.

Prepaid Local Calling

Prepaid local service allows customers to pay in advance for monthly telephone service. Prepaid local companies often target customers who have no credit, bad credit or have been disconnected by a local telephone company for nonpayment. Typically, prepaid rates are much higher than what a traditional local telephone company would charge for basic local service. Connection fees are more expensive, monthly charges can range from \$39-\$69 for basic service and extra features like Caller ID are usually priced higher. Prepaid services are also available from long-distance and wireless companies.

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Long-Distance Providers

Long-distance service is oftentimes available from local telephone companies. There are several other providers that only offer long-distance service. Developing a list of your long-distance needs will help make choosing a provider and plan much easier.

When you decide on a long-distance carrier and set up an account, check your next bill to make sure the switch was made. If you continue to be billed by your previous long-distance carrier, contact your local telephone company. This will let them know you have chosen a new long-distance carrier so they can change the carrier code on your account.

Telephone Service Concerns

Consumers also should keep in mind the type of telephone service they have in case of emergency or need to call 9-1-1. Not all services are created the same.

Power outages

Although electric reliability is expected on a constant basis, power outages can occur. When outages do happen problems can occur with telephone service. Voice over Internet Protocol and cable telephone services will more than likely become unavailable. Cell phones may also be affected during an outage. Use of a cordless telephone will experience interrupted service during an outage because the telephone base depends on electricity to send a signal to the telephone. It is recommended that you have a corded phone available if a power outage occurs especially during an emergency.

9-1-1 Service

In the event of an emergency, 9-1-1 operators need to be able to accurately know where the site of the emergency is located. At times it can be difficult for a caller to describe the location. With enhanced 9-1-1 (E911) technology, operators can automatically identify the telephone number from which consumers are calling and their location.

Nearly every county in Ohio utilizes E911 technology to determine home telephone numbers and the addresses from which they originate. Funding also has been established to expand the use of E911 to cellular telephones in Ohio. Technology that is being installed will allow emergency personnel to pinpoint the location of a cell phone user through global positioning. The availability of 9-1-1 services varies among cable and Internet-based telephone providers. It is important that you understand what emergency service is being provided when choosing a telephone provider.

General Consumer Protections

All local and long-distance telephone companies must meet minimum telephone service standards. The regulations include how much time a company can take to restore service and what action can be taken if your bill is not paid on time. Consumers should note that these service standards don't apply to cable, VoIP and wireless services.

Consumers should keep all of this information in mind before signing up for their telecommunications service. Additional information about all of these services, questions to ask yourself and a company as well as your rights as a consumer are available on the OCC's Web site at www.pickocc.org or by calling toll free 1-877-742-5622.

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), the residential utility consumer advocate, represents the interests of 4.5 million households in proceedings before state and federal regulators and in the courts. The state agency also educates consumers about electric, natural gas, telephone and water issues and resolves complaints from individuals. To receive utility information, brochures, schedule a presentation or file a utility complaint, residential consumers may call 1-877-PICKOCC (1-877-742-5622) toll free in Ohio or visit the OCC Web site at www.pickocc.org.

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel is an equal opportunity employer and provider of services.

For additional information from the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel:

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