
Phone Services - Getting in Touch with the Basics

Ordering a new phone line or two (or changing service to a new provider) is pretty simple - right? Just order the new line and you're done. However, once you call the phone company or visit their web site, you're faced with any number of service choices, packages, feature bundles - a sometimes confusing and frustrating situation for many home business owners.

What are the features that are essential for home business versus the "nice to haves" and those that are designed for consumers - and not your home business? Read on, and we'll attempt to help you choose the telephone features that are "musts", that can make your business and you more productive and those that you should probably avoid.

Phone Service Features You Can't Live Without

When ordering a new or upgraded telephone line(s) for your home business - we believe you just can't live without:

Feature	<i>What It Is, What It Costs</i>	<i>Why It's Important</i>
Call Waiting	That special "tone" that tells you that someone is attempting to call you while you're already on the phone speaking with someone else. You simply press the receiver or your phone's "flash" button to alternate between callers. Cost - \$2.00 to \$3.00/month.	Sometimes important calls/customers just won't wait!
Call Waiting ID	Supplies your Caller ID capable telephone with the name and number of the person attempting to call while you're on the phone. Cost - \$3.00 to \$4.00/month.	It's even better to know who is calling before you answer!
Caller ID	Supplies your Caller ID capable telephone with the name and number of callers. Cost - \$6.00 to \$10.00/month.	One of the best ways we know to fend off unwanted calls from solicitors and/or screen calls for only the "important" ones when you're facing a project deadline.
Voice Mail	An "in network" answering machine. Voice mail services usually come in different "flavors" and costs based on the number of extension mailboxes (extras beyond the first), mailbox capacity and message handling options. Cost - \$7.00 to \$10.00/month	Voice mail lends your business a more professional "look" than a home answering machine. Also, it's there - even if the power in your house goes out! Voice mail is also more easily accessible when you're traveling, and if you purchase one of the more robust packages, provides greater message capacity than a traditional answering machine.
Three Way Calling	Just what it says, allows you to connect to two parties at the same time and do a small-size conference call. Cost \$4.00 - \$6.00/month, plus in some cases, a per connection charge of around \$1.00.	A real time-saver if you need agreement on a customer issue with more than one party.

However, if your business takes you on the road, or keeps you out of your office from time to time and you want to make sure you're still "always connected" to your customers, you should also consider...

Phone Productivity Features

The following capabilities can make you and your business much more productive for a relatively low cost (especially when purchased in a service "bundle"). Some of the best productivity features include:

Feature	What It Is, What It Costs	How it Helps You Become More Productive
Call Forwarding Remote Access to Call Forwarding, Selective Call Forwarding	Just what it says, forwards calls to another number you specify (like your mobile phone or hotel room). Cost - \$2.00 to \$5.00 per month. Change the number calls are forwarded to remotely or turn on/off call forwarding. Selective call forwarding allows you to specify callers whose calls you want forwarded - and not the rest (send to voice mail). Cost varies but each of these services comes in at from \$1.00 to \$3.00 per month.	Sometimes important calls/customers just won't wait! More capability than just turning on/off while you're at home and/or forwarding EVERY call/caller - even the "junk" calls from solicitors.
Unified Messaging	Brings all of your voice mail boxes (cellular/land line) fax and e-mail together. Access to your messages can be either through the web browser on your computer or via a standard telephone. There are a number of products in this space that do more or less than noted above - some only page you if a voice mail arrives, others combine only land line and cellular voice messages. Cost - \$10.95 to \$14.95 per month.	Why check four places for your voice, fax and email messages when you can get them all in one place?

Obviously, your local service provider offers a number of features/capabilities that will aid you in using your telephone more efficiently, effectively and productively. However, there are also a number of features/services offered for local voice services that we think you should avoid.

Run Away!

Not every feature the service providers offer is good for business. Here are a few we think you should avoid!

Feature	What It Is, What It Costs	Why It Should Be Avoided
Auto Redial	Persistently calls a busy number until it gets through. Cost - \$2.00 to \$4.00/month.	Most decent phones come with this feature - buy the phone (one time cost) instead of paying the service provider forever.
Call Return	Calls back the last number that called you. Cost - \$4.00 to \$6.00/month.	Most decent phones come with this feature - buy the phone (one time cost) instead of paying the service provider forever.
Speed Dialing	One number access to a list of phone numbers you specify. Cost - \$2.00 to \$5.00/month.	Most decent phones come with this feature - buy the phone (one time cost) instead of paying the service provider forever.
Anonymous Call Rejection	Turns away calls from any anonymous caller (no Caller ID information). Cost - \$1.00 to \$1.50/month.	What if one of your customers, or a prospective customer blocks Caller ID information? You've just rejected their call!
Call Blocker	Rejects calls from specific callers. Cost - \$2.00 to \$5.00/month.	Caller ID and not picking up the phone works just as well.
Priority Call	Assigns a distinctive ring to calls from important callers you identify. Cost - \$2.00 to \$2.50/month.	Most decent phones come with this feature - buy the phone (one time cost) instead of paying the service provider forever.
Call Intercept/ Privacy Manager	Intercepts unidentified calls/callers and lets you decide whether or to answer the call or send to voice mail. Cost - \$5.00/month.	Customers and prospective customers will find this process onerous and demeaning! User Caller ID instead!

Your phone is the lifeline of your business - so make sure that when you order new service or change to a new provider, you include the service features that will make you and your business more efficient, productive - and profitable!