

How To Choose a Phone System



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WHAT KIND OF BUSINESS DO YOU HAVE? HOME-BASED OR OFFICE?

How would you best describe your current phone systems needs?

HOME-BASED BUSINESS

Establish two business-only phone lines (one for voice and one for fax and/or Internet) for your office. If you'll need to forward calls to other offices, ask your phone company about related services.

Buy a phone with a built-in answering machine and a hold button. If you'll be transferring calls from within your home office, make sure your phone has a transfer button.

Consider getting a small headset for your phone, both to free your hands and to block out background noise.

For features like voice mail, music-on-hold or if more than one employee you may want to consider a small phone system.

OFFICE BASED BUSINESS

How many individual users or "extensions" will you need your system to accommodate?

Are you interested in service and/or maintenance contracts?

Are you interested in leasing/finance options?

What is your estimated budget for this purchase?

What features do you want with your phone system?

How many simultaneous calls or "lines" do you wish your phone system to handle?

Note: Each ongoing call, including people in queue or on hold, uses a "line." Suppliers offer systems starting at a minimum of four lines or simultaneous calls. You should also consider both your current and future needs, as some systems are more expandable than others.

Telephone System Introduction

Telephones are a basic necessity to your company's productivity. As hot as the Internet is, the telephone is often the easiest way to reach your customers, clients, and partners.

It should also be the easiest way for them to reach you. You don't want anyone

How To Choose a Phone System

calling your business only to have calls routed incorrectly, to get disconnected, or to be faced with a bewildering array of automated options.

There are many factors to consider when buying a telephone system. For example, you'll want to coordinate your purchase with other equipment you already own or may need to purchase, such as a voice mail or messaging on-hold system, phone headsets, toll fraud equipment, or tabletop conferencing equipment.

Or if you're a very small business, you may not need a full-blown phone system, but still require something more sophisticated than single- or multi-line phones.

Buying a phone system has never been that easy. Comparing features, expansion options, and costs can result in pages of comparison charts. Now, you can add some more rows to those charts as the phone system continues to evolve.

There are new phone system features to consider when making a purchase. Probably one of the niftiest is the ability to place calls over the Internet, also known as Voice over IP or VoIP. This cutting edge, which some might reasonably argue as being bleeding edge, feature has been available for a few years on personal computers and is just beginning to be rolled out on phone systems.

Another new feature has phone systems utilizing existing computer network cabling. This gets rid of the need to have two sets of cables snake throughout the office, saving significant installation costs, but may require even more robust backup for the computer network. In a similar strike at saving both money and space, users now have the ability to place and receive calls by using their computer equipped with a telephone headset as their telephone. Finally, there is Web-browser based phone system administration that allows an administrator to no longer toil in a small windowless room when managing the phone system.

The other advantage of these new phone systems is that high-end features that were previously only available as high-cost add-on features are now available at little to no additional cost. Voice mail, for example, is something you can find as a standard feature on next generation phone systems. If you were to add it to a traditional phone system, you would typically look at paying an additional few thousand dollars at minimum.

Advanced computer telephony features are also typically bundled in next generation systems. These features range from unified messaging where you can manage your voice mail and e-mail in one common in box to call center applications that allow you to route incoming calls.

Keep in mind that while these new and advanced features sound terrific on paper, they can be less than optimal under actual operating conditions. Careful checking of not only the features but also the operating requirements is a must. In addition, not every phone system dealer has a system that supports any or all of these features. Over time, though, every dealer should have at least one computer-based offering.

Telecommunications companies offer qualified specialists that are comprised of professional, technical experts that work with you to develop a telecommunication system to fit your needs. Virtually all phone systems require the assistance of a

How To Choose a Phone System

dealer for programming and installation. As a result, finding a good dealer can be the most important part of the purchase, since any phone system you choose needs to be properly installed for optimal performance.

Keep these tips in mind when choosing a telecommunications specialist:

-Find out how the company responds to your needs. Are they providing cost effective and high quality service?

-Check on references from companies previously serviced by the company you are considering.

-Cost is always a factor. Be knowledgeable of the products you are choosing.

-Ask yourself...What benefits does this company offer to your home or business?

-Inquire about the dealer's specific installation experience. Ask about the size of the companies involved and what options or features were added.

Some other questions you may want to ask:

- Who will install the system? The dealer or a subcontractor?
- Who will provide training?
- What are the terms of the warranty?
- What are the costs associated with service and maintenance?
- Does the dealer provide backup during a power failure?
- How long will it take for the dealer to respond to trouble calls?
- Does the dealer have remote maintenance capabilities?

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