

The Insider's Buying Guide to..

Selecting a Telecoms Provider

What you need to know

What you need to ask

Desk Research

Before you approach a potential provider, ensure you know all there is to know about your existing telecoms arrangements.

What kind of business are you and how does that effect the way you use the telephone? e.g.

- Regular business model; predominately domestic calls.
- Call centre model; high percentage of calls of a short duration.
- Import / export Model; high percentage of international calls.
- Mobile office model; comprising sales force and executives with high mobile phone usage.

Copy an invoice from each current provider and list the number of lines. This is important as there are a variety of different kinds of lines one may have. These can be anything from BT Analogue to ISDN2 or ISDN30

Highlight:

- Line rentals
- Minimum billing periods
- Connection charges

Reason for change?

Clarify in your mind what has prompted you to change and what you are hoping to achieve. e.g.

Too many invoices:-

When your separate service providers' billing periods all differ, you experience difficulty in combining and monitoring cost of projects, promotions, departments etc.

Possible Desired Objective; To receive one monthly invoice covering all telecom cost centres.

Clarity of invoices:-

Insufficient information or so much information, that it makes it difficult to pinpoint high-cost calls, phone groups or abuse etc.

Possible Desired Objective; Easy to read Data.

Cost of calls:-

Paying too much!

Possible Desired Objective: To reduce payments and see the complete cost of calls, not just the advertised headlines.

Quality of lines:-

Lines dropping during calls, slow downloading or indistinct voice calls.

Possible Desired Objective; To know what quality of lines I need.

Call centre support:-

Slow to respond, unintelligible operators, passed from pillar to post, forever left on hold...

Possible Desired Objective; UK call centre, account management team looking after your account.

List any contracts / service agreements with your telecom line / mobile providers.

- List their termination dates and any service agreements.
- Note the call out times promised and what you need? e.g. 4 hours v 5 days.
- Minimum amount of downtime promised on your broadband.

List the telephone equipment your system uses (e.g. switchboards, telephone groups, how many extensions, voicemail and any contracts / service agreements in to which you may have entered. It may be relevant to the new provider.

Common Mistakes when choosing a Telecom Provider

It's too easy to look at a telecom advertiser's headline claim and only read into it what you want it to mean, rather than what it *really* means. This is not a 'con', but it is your responsibility to make sure you understand the telecom industry 'jargon' and not allow yourself to be carried away with 'headline savings'.

Business Plans:

- Is the plan a good one for you? e.g. Capped calls could hide a high connection charge (they usually do). If your business revolves around making many short calls, the high connection charge per call could really cost you more than you thought. If you are an international conference caller, it could be just the right package, even with the connection charge.

Hidden charges:

- The calls may appear cheap but is there a high monthly or annual rental or an expensive up front 'connection charge' when you first sign up which totally negates any 'savings' you think you may make?

Call charges:

- Are there minimum call charges and what are they? Some providers boast about a low call rate, but only after the first minute, which can be considerably dearer than the rest of the call. If your calls take only a few minutes, that could get expensive.
- Are you being billed by the minute or second? If you are quoted by the minute, and a call goes over the minute to, e.g. 2' 04" you will be charged for 3 complete minutes.

Contracts and Set up Charges

- Does your contract tie you in for a minimum length of time or can you give notice at your discretion?
- Does your provider have any hidden charges in addition to your regular call costs and line rentals?
- Do you have to pay 'set-up' or 'installation charges' before you can be transferred onto the provider's system?

UK v Offshore Call Centre:

- Many service based industries with offshore call centres explain that these facilities allow them to cut their overheads and pass that on to their customers. However, from your own personal experience you will know that having to deal with offshore call centres consumes more management time and creates more frustration than is fully justified by the 'cost savings'.
- If this does not present a problem to you, it may not prove relevant to your decision. However, if good customer service,

clear lines and the other benefits of using a provider with a UK Call Centre are important to you, ask if they have one.

Multiple providers lead to 'Blame Circles'

- You may be able to negotiate preferential deals with separate suppliers (e.g. equipment, lines, broadband) but when problems occur, be wary of the blame circle, whereby each supplier will blame one of the other providers for any problem you may have.
- Look for a telecom provider prepared to service all your telecom needs under one roof, then they cannot pass the buck

The devil is in the detail:

- Don't be oversold and allow yourself to make a decision based only on the cheapest headline price. Always study the small print and read this paper over again to discover where the hidden costs can be found.

Know what Broadband you are buying:

- What is the minimum download speed I can realistically expect?
All broadband providers (ISPs) advertise the maximum theoretical download speed, the faster the speed, the quicker your e-mails, websites and files appear on your screen.
- What is the minimum upload speed I can expect?
What ISPs don't tell you is the upload speed. This effects everything you are sending. So if you are regularly sending and receiving files on a network, working with large file formats like graphic, music, video and photo files, or using Voip for telephone calls and you don't want to cut out or sound as if you are calling from the other side of the world, you need to make sure your upload speed is up to the job.
- Is my download access unlimited or are there any monthly download limitations?
Download limitations are only suitable for private use where a few e-mails and limited surfing may be all that is required. Businesses with heavy use, as illustrated by the examples in the previous question, need unlimited downloads in order to run their business efficiently.

- What is the contention ratio?
Even if you start out with a high download speed, if a large number of computers are sharing the same bandwidth as you, (a high contention ratio eg. 50:1) your upload and download speeds could be drastically reduced. A low contention ratio eg. 20:1 (or lower) will mean only a smaller number of other computers could be sharing your bandwidth and therefore you will receive a faster network speed.

Other ISP Support Questions to ask.

- Does the ISP include firewalls and virus software as standard?
- Does the ISP back up my business data?
- Does the ISP enable me to use Voip?
- What happens if the connection goes down?
- Is there a minimum service level guarantee with fixed repair times?
- What are the upfront costs?
- What is the monthly cost?
- How long is the minimum contract?

Key Questions to ask when making your enquiries

About the company:

- How many years have you been in business?
- Where is the company based?
- Where is your Call Centre based?
- Are you independent or owned by a larger group?
- If I contact your call centre, will I be answered by an automatic system with multiple and confusing menu choices or by a live person who can immediately direct my call to my own personal account management team handling my account?
- Do you offer a full 24/7 fault reporting service if my SLA's demand it?
- Do you service any companies I may know in the local area who would give me a reference?
- Could I visit and see your facilities if I wanted to?
- How many customers do you currently have?

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Invoicing

- Can I request monthly call statistics to my specification? (e.g. showing specific telephone groups, highlighting calls that exceed predetermined time / values).
- Can I request call statistics in varying formats? (e.g. hard copy / e-mail; excel / pdf).
- To how many decimal points are invoices rounded up? (If you are making many short calls, the points of a second on each call can mount up).

Contracts

- How quickly do you respond to a call out?
- What guarantee / compensation do you give if you let us down?
- What is the minimum contract period into which I have to enter?
- What penalties do I incur if I leave you at short notice?



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