



Firing your phone company - the cutting edge of talk

Voice over IP allows you to 'talk all you want' for one low price, but caveat emptor

Of all the inventions over the last 100-plus years that have changed our lives, few if any have made as much of an impact – or remained as relatively intact – as the telephone. Alexander Graham Bell's invention opened the door to worldwide communications, and made person-to-person communication the new normal. It is directly responsible for much of what came after it – from cell phones to fax machines to the Internet itself.

Ironic, then, that the Internet is to serve as the springboard for the next wave in home communication technology – Voice Over Internet Protocol, or VOIP. Unlike many emerging technologies that promise great benefits but don't ultimately fulfill their full potential, VOIP has already rolled out – and is making phone companies very nervous indeed.

So, just what is VOIP, and can it benefit you over traditional home phones? VOIP has its advantages, and they are big ones – but it also has disadvantages the emerging VOIP companies won't tell you in any great detail. Luckily, you read the *East Orlando Sun* – so you're going to get the "inside scoop."

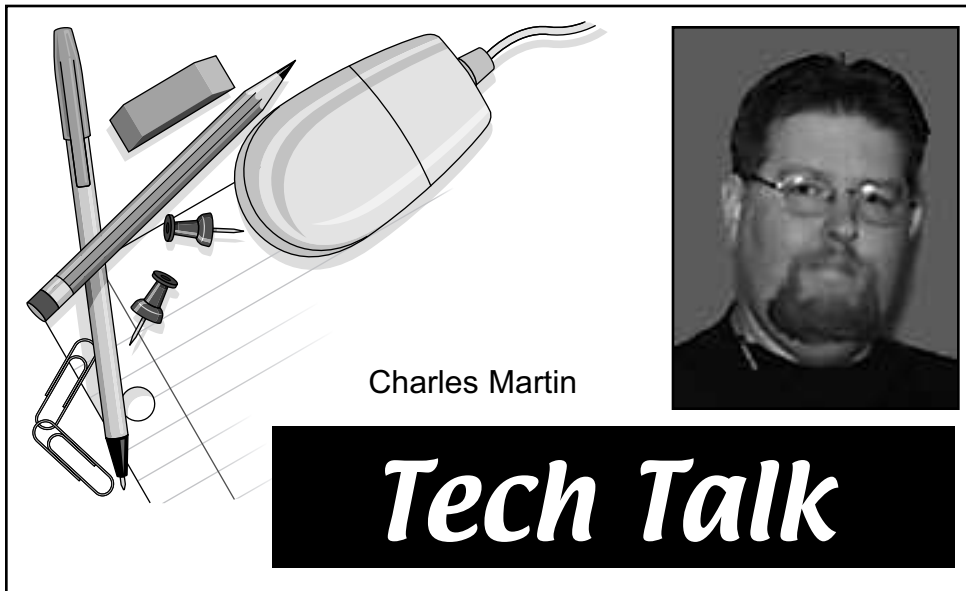
Woo-Hoooo-Woo-Hoo-Hoo ...

You may have seen (or more accurately, winced at) the commercials from a company called **Vonage** on television by now, or noticed the billboards from **Bright House** and others offering "digital phone service" for a flat rate. The major selling point of all the VOIP providers is big savings over conventional home telephone service – which we'll call "land lines" in keeping with today's jargon.

As people use their cell phones for more and more of their day-to-day phone needs, they've started to wonder why they pay \$50 or more per month for a "land line" which they use less and less often. Many people have cut out their "land lines" altogether and rely exclusively on their cells, but that too has its drawbacks – for starters, people tend to change cell phone companies frequently (which until recently meant getting a new number). Exclusive cell-phone use also creates problems for 911 operators, who can't always fix your location. Cell phones also (generally) don't have as wide a range of services as "land lines" (like three-way calling, multi-line business use and so on).

So there's still a need for a "land line" of some kind. There's also, thanks to the ridiculous overage charges the cell phone companies extract for long-distance gabbers, a need for modestly-priced long-distance calling.

What Vonage and their competitors (such as **Voicepulse**, **Lingo** and **Packet8** among others) promise is a system that is almost (but not quite) as reliable and feature-laden as a typical "land line" for a fraction of the cost. Most offer a flat-rate unlimited calling plan – you can call anywhere in the US and Canada at any time of the day or night for as long as you like – for around \$25/month (Bright House inexplicably charges \$40/month for a similar service). There's only one pre-requisite: you *must* have a high-speed cable-modem connection already existing (DSL connections won't work for this). You'll



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Tech Talk

also need a router (a very inexpensive device to "split" your cable internet signal among multiple devices).

In addition to all the long-distance you can eat, these new VOIP companies promise all the features of a regular land-line and more – aggressive anti-telemarketing features, timed do-not-disturb features, creative voicemail and even portability (you can take the equipment you get from your VOIP provider with you where you go, plug it into your hotel's or office's ethernet line and answer your "home" phone as normal). All this for \$25 (or less) a month?! Sign me up!

Putting VOIP to the Test

Indeed, I *did* sign up. After looking over my options, I fired Sprint (my previous home phone provider) and got an MTA box from Voicepulse (who were one of only two VOIP companies capable of transferring my existing 407 number). I answered a few easy questions on their Web site, decided on which plan I wanted (I opted for the \$15/month plan that includes 200 minutes of long-distance rather than all-you-can-eat – I don't do that much non-cell LD calling), and a few days later a package arrived. Installation was as follows:

1. Plug ethernet cord from router to MTA box from Voicepulse, Plug MTA's power cord into socket.
2. Plug phone into phone socket on MTA.
3. Make test call. It works!

Wow, that was easy – but how would I feel about it after a month or two? Well, I've now had the service for two months, and I can report that I've very satisfied. I'm saving money, I'm able to call long-distance anytime I want, and best of all – absolutely *no* telemarketers so far!

The only part of VOIP that's "different" is the MTA box. You use your regular phone and it behaves just like always did. There are some drawbacks, though. First of all, it took me a while to get Sprint to cut all power to my "old" phone line. I needed them to do this because once the line is actually "dead" (instead of just inactive), you can plug the MTA into any phone jack in the house and all the phones are now connected. *Cool.*

Second, if you sign up with anyone other than Voicepulse or Bright House, you'll probably have to change phone numbers. This isn't really a big deal to me, but for

some people it's impractical.

Third, VOIP relies very heavily on your upstream capability. This means that in order for your voice to be sent clearly to other phones, there needs to be a lot of "bandwidth" available going out to the Net. If you or someone in your household is running one of those pirating "P2P" programs like Limewire, Bearshare, Bit Torrent or KaZaa, you may very well experience "gurgling" on the line that make it impossible for people to understand you or vice versa. The P2P programs simply soak up all the bandwidth they can, and unless you go in and modify settings to avoid them using up all your available up/downstream capability, talking on VOIP is impractical.

There's also a couple more "theoretical" drawbacks: loss of power (if your cable goes out due to a storm or because you didn't pay your bill, there goes your VOIP as well), and a lack of "normal" 911 service. Congress just passed a law that gives these companies 90 days to implement an "enhanced 911" service, so in the next couple of months that latter concern (which can be a big barrier to going with VOIP) will be resolved, and it's been noted that most cable companies bury their lines just like phone companies, so you shouldn't have any more "disconnects" with cable than you do with phone companies (though they may be slower to fix problems).

None of these concerns were enough to talk me out of VOIP, but I'll admit that if I didn't have the "backup" of cell phones I would be a lot more hesitant to trust this "new" technology.

Choice is Good

Maybe being a techno "pioneer" doesn't appeal to you, but you should be grateful for those who *are* forging the VOIP frontier – they are putting pressure on phone companies to shape up or ship out. You'll have probably noticed that regular phone companies are now promoting "talk all you want" long distance plans – this is a *direct* result of the pressure coming from VOIP companies. In the end, VOIP will probably completely replace conventional phone lines as the primary "land line" technology for people – but don't expect to say goodbye to unsightly phone poles any soon.

Should *you* sign up for VOIP? If saving money on long distance is a big concern, and you don't have teens downloading bucketfuls of illegal movies and music, then VOIP may turn out to be a surprisingly flexible and inexpensive option that could solve a lot of your phone-related problems: growth (adding numbers, even 800 numbers or out-of-area numbers, is a snap), feature management and telemarketer-blocking are all easier, cheaper and better on VOIP.

On the other hand, if you don't have cell phones as backup or don't think you'll feel comfortable without 911 service (for the next couple of months), it would probably be best to wait. This is still an emerging technology, albeit one with a lot of promise already fulfilled. The bottom line here is this: talk is cheap ... and getting cheaper.