Cellular Phone Buying Guide Essay, Research Paper

Cellular phones are now owned by one out of three people living in the United States. It is believed that this number will approach, and probably reach, one out of two within the short future. With so many companies producing and marketing the use of cellular phones, rates for their use have dramatically reduced within the last four to five years. The size of the phones has decreased, while their number of features and ease of use has increased. Analog connections are now becoming obsolete, in favor of the clearer and battery-saving digital connection. Many units on the market now are tri-mode, meaning that in addition to analog they use the digital signals of TDMA and CDMA. Strides like these have made mobile communication increasingly popular as well as reliable. With this popularity, companies have been able to reduce their monthly rates while offering many features free of charge, features that the user is accustomed to paying for on their house phone line. This competition has led many to use their cellular phone as their main phone, or even their only phone. Some of the features that have made cellular communications so popular are the following: free nights and/or weekends, caller identification, call forwarding, three-way calling, voice mail, text messaging and Internet access. Many of these features are either free or of very low cost. When combined with the intelligent use of peak minutes and free nights and weekends (usually between 8 am and 8 pm), a consumer can quickly find that a cellular phone plan is cheaper than their home phone plan. The problem is finding out which provider, which plan, and which phone make the most sense for each individual.

Within this report is a comprehensive guide to the plans now offered by the three major providers of cellular service in our area. These providers are Sprint, Verizon, and Cingular Wireless (formerly Cellular One). Although their many plans are similar, they can become extremely confusing. A calling plan should be chosen based on the following: 1) When the phone will be used. 2) For how long each day it will be used. 3) Where the phone calls will be made from. 4) Whom the user will be calling. These factors can quickly get confusing when you take into consideration the different home/roaming areas of each provider. Both Verizon and Cingular now offer three plans for coverage. One a local coverage area, which generally covers from Buffalo to Albany from east to west, with a limited coverage north and south of the I-90. The second plan offered by both covers a good portion of the east coast, down through Maryland for Verizon, and through Virginia for Cingular. Both Verizon and Cingular have recently added national plans to their available coverage options, and although these plans are more expensive than the local and regional, they can make sense for many. Although some areas are not covered within these National Plans, they generally cover the entire continental United States. A good portion of the Midwest for Cingular is not covered while Verizon does cover most of this area. However Verizon does not cover much of the breadbasket of the US, namely Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma, all of which have no coverage. Sprint’s plans are all national, but only for “300 major metropolitan areas” which excludes millions of Americans, this leads to exorbitant roaming charges which can be accumulated out of necessity in one’s home town. This is true especially for the Midwest and the west coast. Contained on this page are the national coverage areas of the three providers.

The complicated coverage of these maps is often forgotten while one is on vacation or making long-distance calls, that is why choosing a local or regional plan can often times make more sense. Sprint’s “Free and Clear” plan, as you can see by the map, is neither free nor clear in all areas. Although their coverage is expanding, they are truthful when they claim that their system was built from “the ground up”. Only their phones use their Personal Communication System (PCS) towers, and many of their phones do not operate on an analog signal at all, and those that do must use the towers built by other companies. For this the user is charged thirty-five cents for each minute spent outside of the Sprint PCS network. This applies even if the user is within their own home.

With over twenty different mobile phones now compatible with the three major networks, choosing a phone is a very difficult task. Many plans have phones available at no cost with an agreement to a one or two year contract. Sprint is the one company that offers no reduction in price with an accompanying contract, while Verizon and Cingular offer reduced costs with an agreement. Oftentimes the retail prices of dual and tri-mode phones can be well over $250, but this can be significantly reduced to between twenty and fifty dollars if a new contract is signed. This quickly makes Sprint an expensive choice because as of March 1st, 2001, they did not offer a phone for under eighty dollars. On the following pages are some of the most popular phones offered by each provider, and the advantages and disadvantages of each. These are only some of the phones offered by these providers, as availability changes from region to region.

Cingular Wireless

Motorola V2290

Pros: Can receive/send text messages

Many different faces and rubber covers available for customization

Has a mode where phone acts as pager

Cons: Very little talk time in digital mode (100 minutes)

Only holds 99 numbers in phone book

Cost: $30

Ericsson T18d

Pros: Tri-mode

Data/Fax capable (it acts as a modem with proper connections) Built in vibrate call alert

Profiles (different sets of settings easily switchable)

Cons: Expensive

Ericsson accessories hard to come by

Cost: $130 ($80 with possible $50 mail in rebate)

Nokia 7160

Pros: Infrared (IrDA) for communication with PC

Profiles (different sets of settings easily switchable)

Wireless access to Internet (service at additional cost)

4 games

Cons: Largest phone offered

Sliding number cover flimsy; possible breakage

Cost: $100

Ericsson A1228d

Pros: Easy read menus

Free with contract agreement

Cons: Newer model available (2228-mysteriously not available as of 3/18/01)

Heaviest phone (8 oz) with terrible talk time (digital-105 minutes)

Cost: Free with agreement

Sprint

Note: All sprint phones have Internet access available at an additional cost

Motorola Touchpoint 2100

Pros: Voice activated dialing

Games

Data/Fax capable

Cons: A tad thick/gawky

Built in speakerphone only half duplex (works like a walkie-talkie)

Cost: $150

Sanyo SCP 4500

Pros: Full duplex built in speakerphone

Voice activated dialing

Supports text messages

Cons Phallic in shape

Cost: $180

Samsung SCH 8500

Pros: Small design

Built in Internet minibrowser

Cons: Expensive

Active flip has large connections-very often break or are damaged

Cost: $200

Samsung SCH 3500

Pros: Built in minibrowser

Rated #1 by Consumer Reports, Fall 2000 \*see note at end of report\*

Cons: Rather low talk time (2.5 hours in digital mode)

Arms that hold earpiece break frequently

Cost: $150

Kyocera QCP 2035

Pros: Two way text messaging

Vibrate alert

Sprints cheapest phone

Cons: Not quite as trendy looking as some of Sprints other options

Cost: $100

Motorola Timeport P8167

Pros: Built in vibrate alert

Great reception, great menu access

Can receive text messages

Cons: All ringer options high pitched and irritating

Very costly

Three-colored screen not available through Sprint (only Verizon)

Cost: $230

Verizon

Nokia 5185i

Pros: Accessories very easy to find-especially faceplates

Tri-mode

Cons: Phone book only holds 99 numbers

Lacks many popular options

Cost: $50

Kyocera QCP 3065

Pros: Built in Palm Pilot w/software

Vibrate alert

Tri-mode

Cons: Large size

Fragile flip cover

Cost: $399

Motorola StarTac 7868

Pros: Small size

Tri-mode

Cons: Weak battery

Lacks many options most phones have standard

Cost: $149

Audiovox CDM 9000

Pros: Data capable

Can receive text messages

Tri-mode

Cons: Weak battery

Phone book only holds 99 entries

Cost: $60

Motorola Vulcan V8160

Pros: Smallest phone available

Web enabled

Cons: Too small for comfortable use

Expensive

Cost: $199

\*\*Also available through Verizon: Kyocera QCP 2035 and the Motorola

Timeport P8767, reviewed through Verizon\*\*

Recommendations

For general and personal use: For the average person’s needs, Verizon and Cingular Wireless make the most sense with their expandable coverage plans and inclusion of free night and weekend calling with all plans 19.99 and up (does not always apply to Verizon). As a college student I find I use 95% of my minutes in the evenings and on the weekends, and my phone is off the majority of the daytime. Unless a more advanced phone is desired, the Ericsson’s and Nokia’s are reasonably priced and come with a wide array of options. Hidden costs are minimal and with three options for coverage, roaming charges can be reduced to a bare minimum. A plan for thirty to forty dollars offers between 200-400 peak minutes, which is often more than enough for general use. Verizon and Cingular offer caller ID, call waiting, three-way calling, call forwarding and voice mail, all free of charge.

For business use: Sprint’s nationwide coverage attracts many, while offering the most peak minutes at the lowest rates. Watch for promotions where you can quickly double the minutes of a plan for the original price; they seem to have them every few months. All calls for most of their plans within the continental United States classify as “local calls” as long as you are within their digital coverage while the call is in progress. Features such as caller ID and voicemail are presented as options, but rarely can you get all the options you want without having to pay an additional cost. These “pick and chose” promotions can be misleading, as they have hidden costs. The Samsung SCH 3500 and the Motorola Timeport are great choices, with the Samsung being the most cost-effective of Sprints available phones in that it offers the most options for the lowest cost. While the Timeport is quite expensive, it is the best phone on the market and can act as a modem with the proper cable. This can be quite handy for those who frequently use laptops and need an Internet connection available to them.

Other Options: Some of Sprint’s plans are still month-to-month; this is an asset to those who don’t want to be tied down to a contract. This is a very expensive option but can be cost saving if a phone is only needed for a short period of time. Another cheap alternative to a yearly contract (all starting at 19.99) is prepaid cellular service. Usually the phone is included, and for around sixty cents a minute you can get prepaid communications with a prepackaged phone and calling card. Oftentimes this is a strictly analog phone (less reliable), but can be of great help in an emergency-the most common reason for the purchase of a prepaid phone. These packages and additional calling cards can be purchased at a wide variety of places, but are most commonly found in gas stations and supermarkets.

Throughout the 1990’s, Nokia and Motorola controlled the mobile phone market, but with companies new to wireless communications such as Samsung and Sanyo, the leaders have had to release better phones at lower prices. Within the last few years’ features that were once only available to land lines, became available to mobile phones, and with time these features became free of charge for most plans. Caller ID and call waiting are two of these features. While the major phone companies still charge for these features along with many others, cellular users have been enjoying them free of charge for some time.

Choosing a phone can be quite difficult, and with the pros and cons I have listed, the reception is not taken into consideration as it varies dramatically based on location, battery power and numerous other elements. Merely being near a computer or behind a brick wall can cause even a tri-mode phone to struggle to find a signal. Many who purchase a cellular phone believe that it will work everywhere, without a glitch. They quickly realize that this is untrue, and oftentimes try to return the phone as defective. However wireless communication is not perfect, nor can it perform as reliably as a landline. There are certain areas, such as basements and electronics stores, where cellular phones just cannot operate. What you are paying for is wireless communication, not another phone line. However by knowing your phone limits and the limits of your carrier, you can maximize your reliability while using your phone almost as if it is connected to a landline.

Many times a mobile phone bill is comparable to that of a home bill, while offering more features and giving you the major advantage of being entirely wireless. I encourage everyone who uses a telephone to compare his or her home bill to that of a cellular customer, and consider joining the millions who already have gone wireless. The best way to go about choosing a cellular provider is to stop into their local stores and analyze each one’s service through their provided literature and by talking to a representative. I recommend staying away from the service providers in the mall, as oftentimes they have less knowledgeable staff and are less likely to bargain with you on certain aspects of their plans. By gathering all the latest information on all three providers, looking at your current phone bill, and talking to current cellular users, one can quickly gain all the insight they need to make an intelligent purchase.

\*The reason the Samsung SCH 3500 was rated top mobile phone by Consumer Reports is because their analysis was based solely upon features available on the phones themselves. The major downfall of this phone is that it is only available through Sprint, and thusly available only to those within Sprint’s limited PCS n

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