Tech Tips from Mr G

Why You Need a Cheap Cell Phone: A Guide for People Who Hate Cell Phones



Do you remember when it only cost 10¢ to use a phone booth, and your parents made sure that you always had a couple of dimes in your pocket for emergency calls? Heck, do you remember phone booths, for that matter? Well, with the old familiar phone booth on the endangered species list along with the California condor and the Siberian tiger, if you don't already have a cell phone, now is the time to give some serious thought to finally getting one.

Resistance is Futile

I've heard all the reasons why some people resist getting a cell phone, and quite frankly, I'm not buying any of them.

To the woman who likes her down time away from people, I say, "Just turn the phone off until \underline{you} want to use it."

To the man who says that he doesn't like being perpetually available to people, I say, "Just turn the thing off," or "Don't answer it unless you feel like it." Really. There's no law that says that you have to answer the phone every time it rings, be it the newfangled cell phone on your hip or the good old-fashioned landline on your wall. I figure that if it's important enough, they'll leave a message.

And finally, to the person who says that they're too expensive, I say, "We're not talking about an iPhone here. I'm talking about a \$10 or \$15 prepaid cell phone."

However...I will add, what about the people that you expect to pick up when <u>you</u> call? Isn't that whole attitude of never wanting anyone to be able to reach you a little unfair?

Them

Actually, there is one more reason why some people resist getting cell phones: the fear of "them." These people are afraid of being connected to "the system," and afraid that the masters of "the system" are using those phones to track and get information about them.

If you're one of those people, there's not really much I can say to change your mind; and I have to admit that recent revelations about the NSA haven't helped much. I will say, however, that if "they" really are tracking my every move with my cell phone, it means that I can easily prove that I <u>wasn't</u> at the scene of the crime.

Hmm...now maybe that's a good reason to get one!

Why You Need That Phone

OK, so now that I've told you why I don't buy the arguments against them, let me tell you why I think it's time for you to finally bite the bullet and buy one.

First of all, as I said earlier, if they were animals, phone booths would be on the endangered species list. Our oldest daughter got her first cell phone at eight years old when we realized that sending her out on her bike with two dimes didn't mean anything anymore. Really...what good are two dimes for the phone booth, when there are no phone booths to use them in?

And when you get right down to it, all the other reasons you need a cell phone boil down to pretty much the same thing...your <u>safety</u>. If you need to call someone in case of emergency, you've got a phone right there. That definitely beats taking your two dimes and hiking down the dark and lonely road, hoping to find a phone booth to call someone from.



But the one I run into most frequently as the Technology Librarian has to do with password security. Nowadays, if you forget your email or Facebook password, those services will try to text a special verification code to your <u>cell phone</u>...because your cell phone is usually proof that it's you calling, and not some hacker. But if you don't have a cell phone to text that code to, it takes that much longer to resolve the password issues. And here I'm talking about <u>days</u> rather than minutes. In fact, nowadays many of those services require a cell phone number from you before they even issue you an account. Once again, it's about your security.

Really...the time has come, the Walrus said, to get thee to a phone store. Or at least either Walmart or Target to get a phone.

Times Have Changed

Yes...times have changed quite a bit since the time I first saw a cell phone 20 years ago, and they were only for the rich...or drug dealers. The iPhone notwithstanding, prices have dropped tremendously on both the phones and service plans. 10 years ago my wife and I thought we were getting a great deal on three phones with the Family Plan that our provider offered. Then seven years later, that same provider told us that we used our phones so little that the Family Plan we were on was a waste of money for us, and that as soon as our contracts expired, we should switch to prepaid service.

Let me say that again, in case you missed it. The people at one of that company's stores (I won't tell you the name, but I'll tell you that it rhymes with **JP&P**) told us that we'd be better off switching to prepaid service because we weren't using anywhere near the amount of minutes that our \$90/month was paying for. Between the three of us, we were only using \$11 of service each month.

Prepaid is the Answer

Thanks to providers like **AT&T**, with their **GoPhone** service; **Verizon**, with their own prepaid service; and **Tracfone**, you can get a very basic cell phone for as little as \$9.99 or you could spend over \$150 for one with a few more bells and whistles on it. You can also buy a \$100 card that will keep your phone in service for up to a year. Think about it...that's about \$8.33/month for phone service.

I say that the card will keep you in service for up to a year because it all depends on whether or not you run out of minutes (or money) before the card's expiration date. If you talk a lot and use up all your minutes inside of two weeks (which I know you won't do, because you hate cell phones), then you'll have to renew a lot sooner. On the other hand, if you've gone to the end of a year and have only used up 60 minutes, you'll still have to renew with a new card for another year, but the minutes you haven't used yet will roll over. Right now my 11-year-old daughter is accumulating minutes faster than she can use them, but I'm quite sure that she'll start burning those minutes up when she becomes a teenager.

I mentioned the \$100 card because it's cheaper in the long run, but the prepaid providers also sell cards in \$15, \$25, and \$50 increments. The problem with these cards is that they tend to expire much sooner...even if you still have minutes left. A \$15 card from most providers is usually good for only 30 days. That means that if you bought one every month, you'd be paying \$180 by the time a year had gone by.

Another issue with buying the less expensive cards is remembering when they expire, and scrambling to buy a new one before you miss any calls. Each member of my family buys a new one-year card in the month they were born. After all, you can always remember your own birthday...I hope.

Is It Minutes or Money?

Some prepaid providers sell you cards with a certain amount of $\underline{\text{minutes}}$ on them and others let you add $\underline{\text{money}}$ to your account. What's the difference? Not much, really. It's just two different ways of talking about the same thing. One service may talk about how much $\underline{\text{money}}$ you have left because it counts phone calls as 10¢/minute and text messages as 20¢ each. Another service may say that each $\underline{\text{minute}}$ is worth 10¢, and that a text message counts as two minutes. What's really important is that you know when you're getting low on them.

The Rest of Us

But suppose you're one of the millions of people out there who already bought into the concept of having a cell phone, and use it all the time. Does anything I've said so far apply to you at all? Most definitely yes.

You might not be getting your money's worth out of your "unlimited" plan. You might not even be close to using the 450 minutes you're paying for each month.

In addition to the 10¢/minute plan that are meant for low users like myself, there are also prepaid <u>plans</u> that are very competitive with the contract plans. For example, the "unlimited" contract plan from one provider for a basic phone is \$70/month. Their "unlimited" prepaid plan is \$50. Their "unlimited" prepaid plan for a smartphone is \$60. So it may be worth your while to switch.

Once again, the important thing is knowing how much you use the phone each month. That information will help you figure out whether or not switching to prepaid is the best idea for you.

And best of all, you can probably keep the phone number that you already have!

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