

Slash your phone bills

Written by Jason Alderman
Sunday, 12 September 2010 23:34

Sometimes I miss the days before cell phones, email and voicemail. Sure, they've simplified our lives in many ways – remember how frustrating it was trying to reach people before answering machines? On the downside, though, not only do we often feel compelled to be accessible 24-7, but it's expensive. After factoring in Internet service and cable or satellite TV, you might be paying thousands of dollars a year to keep your family wired and wireless.

Here are a few cost-saving tips that might help:

- Examine your home phone bill for services you may have signed up for but aren't using, such as call waiting, call forwarding or caller ID. Dropping them could save \$100 a year or more, depending on your plan.
- If you have good cell phone reception at home, try using your cell for long-distance calls. But be sure to stay within your monthly minute allowance or your bill will skyrocket. When in doubt, check your remaining minutes at your carrier's website or by calling or texting their "remaining balance" code.
- More and more folks are dropping their land lines altogether, relying solely on cell phones. Just be sure it's always fully charged – beware of extended power failures. And note that in an emergency, 911 operators may not be able to track your location if you're unable to speak, as they can with a land line.
- Another possible route is using a service that let you make free or low-cost calls (often, including international calls) using your Internet broadband connection. Some popular versions include Skype, Vonage and Google Voice. You'll need to buy certain equipment upfront to enable the connection and monthly and/or per-minute charges may apply.
- In addition, many cable TV carriers offer competitively priced digital phone service via their broadband connection. Be aware that with either of these types of broadband phone service you risk losing coverage during power failures, so it's wise to have a cell phone as backup.
- You may be able to lower your overall communications bill by bundling home phone, cell phone, TV and Internet services together through one carrier. Plus, it's convenient to pay only one monthly bill. Just make sure you're not being restricted on services you want or overpaying for those you don't; and do the math on rates after the introductory period, if one applies.

A few more tips:

- Watch for offers made to new customers and ask to be given the same deal – or threaten to take your business elsewhere.
- Using a prepaid phone card for long-distance calls from home may be cheaper per minute than coverage through your phone company.
Ask if your employer has a cell phone plan discount for employees.
- Explore family calling/texting plans in which you can share minutes among family members.

Slash your phone bills

Written by Jason Alderman

Sunday, 12 September 2010 23:34

- Add up your family's monthly calling and texting charges and see if the carrier's unlimited minutes plan is more affordable.

Comparing all these options may seem like a lot of work, but you could save hundreds of dollars a year by choosing the right plans. Plus, you may just realize that you're wasting too much valuable time on the phone, watching television and surfing the Internet.

Jason Alderman directs Visa's financial education programs. To Follow Jason Alderman on Twitter: www.twitter.com/PracticalMoney