

Planning Your Next Telephone System

Your company's telephone system will often be the first physical contact a potential customer will have with your company. Don't risk alienating them with too many choices and no option to speak to a human being. Today's affordable telephone systems are specifically designed to meet the needs of small to medium sized companies and can be used to effectively make the caller feel good about interacting with your company.

Voice mail can enhance your callers experience by giving them an option to have a non-simultaneous completion of a voice communication. Auto attendant can provide a list of options including reaching an individual, a mailbox, or a receptionist. Callers can have the option to search a company directory for a specific person or department. Call centers can systematically hold calls in a queue to be routed to your employees. Callers can listen to an announcement about a special promotion or a new product before being transferred. Research has shown that 34 percent of callers will ask about a product of service advertised while on hold.

Here is a list of things to consider when planning for your next phone system:

- How many incoming lines do you need now and in 3-5 years?
- How many handsets will you need now and in 3-5 years and what will be the features needed for each station? A phone in a lobby will need far fewer features than a phone for a receptionist or salesperson.
- How many voice mail boxes will you need now and in 3-5 years?
- Is automated attendant required?
- Will you need to transfer calls to cell phones?
- Will you need full featured wireless phones for outdoors or in the warehouse area?
- Will you want the caller to hear special promotion while on hold?
- Will you need to extend the functionality of the main system to knowledge workers on the move with PDA's, in remote offices or for home offices?
- Will you need call center functionality such as the ability to record and monitor incoming calls, reporting, automated call distribution (ACD), interactive voice response (IVR) or screen pops?
- Will you need advanced features such as automatic speech recognition (ASR), or unified messaging which can be used to send a user's email, fax, and voice mail to either their PC or phone?
- Will you need a system that is expandable in the future?

- Is there a UPS (uninterruptible power supply) provided in case of loss of power?
- Is remote support available to reduce future service costs?
- Is there web browser support?
- How much can you reasonably afford to spend on a new telephone system?

And finally the big question is, should you completely rip out your old phone system and replace it with a new all IP based system (VOIP), or choose an integrated system that lets you take full advantage of your existing systems and gradually convert to all an all IP system in stages?

There are several reasons why the later approach makes good sense. First, there is not a default standard defined yet for IP phones so current signaling remains proprietary. Second, a switch to an all IP based phone system requires the installer to consider bandwidth requirements for the LAN (local Area Network) and the WAN (Wide Area Network) as well as quality-of-service required for adequate voice quality. Companies may need to upgrade their LAN and WAN infrastructure to accommodate the all IP voice system which can be expensive. Third, many of the features associated with IP phones such as integration with PDA's, call forwarding and GUI interface are available on legacy systems.

A better approach may be to migrate to an all IP based voice system in stages, first by using a VOIP gateway to reduce long distant costs between locations. By running both data and voice over one WAN circuit, it is possible to bypass the Public Switched Telephone Network completely. Secondly, introduce IP voice end points such as PDA's, wireless phones, and IP phones to expand your system within your main campus or to remote workers. Third, implement an all IP Telephony communications system when standards have been set. An all IP system allows you to take advantage of a centrally managed infrastructure giving you the option to rollout unified messaging, multimedia call centers, video conferencing, auto attendant, and voice mail all on one network.

Taking the time to inventory your needs for now and in the future is time well spent and will give you enough information to make an informed choice. You should consider at least a couple different systems and understand the pros and cons of each. Going for the cheaper system now may cost you more money in the long run.

Dale Martell