



How to Buy a Telephone System

There are many factors to consider when purchasing a telephone system. We've highlighted a few of the key considerations to think about when evaluating telephone systems.

Investment Horizon

Make sure you buy a telephone system that will grow with your business. Too often businesses buy what they need now, not what they need over the next 3 years. If you plan for less than 3 years, you're likely overpaying because vendors expect you to use a system for a 3 year period and pricing often reflects that. If you plan for longer than that, you'll be using a telephone system that may become obsolete and will be missing features at the end of its life that could help your business grow.

Sizing your Telephone System

Ensure that you understand how the telephone system will change as you add (or subtract) lines and extensions. Telephone system vendors design their telephone systems to fit different size businesses. Traditional telephone systems, or key systems, stuck to fairly standard sizing configurations based on the number of outside lines and internal extensions a business requires. Standard configurations include 3 lines by 8 telephones. More recently, advanced telephone systems, or PBXs, have been sized by number of ports. A telephone system with a capacity for 32 ports can have any combination of lines and telephones that add up to 32; the increments of this ratio being determined by how many lines or stations the manufacture puts on the different circuit boards.

Tip: Always make sure you ask how much adding additional ports, lines or telephones will cost and in what increments they can be added.

Basic Telephone System Features

The features of your telephone system start with the basics of what your business will use to communicate externally and internally. Most telephone systems ship with a core set of features that any business requires. Some are obvious like voicemail, while some are not so obvious, like the ability to put a call

on hold. Here's a list of features to at least be aware of when considering a purchase:

Voicemail – Voicemail is a non-negotiable feature in this day and age and allows callers to leave messages in specific mail boxes usually assigned to employees or departments. Make sure the telephone system has enough ports to support the maximum number of callers who could simultaneously leave messages or the maximum number of employees who could simultaneously check messages.

Call Hold – The ability to place a call on hold is a basic, but often forgotten feature. It's useful for employees to place calls on hold when they need to seek help before answering a call or perform a function on the call like when forwarding or conferencing.

Call Forward – Businesses use call forwarding to transfer calls to other extensions. Calls can be forwarded to employees, voicemail boxes, the auto-attendant, or hunt groups (logical groups of employees like the sales department where the call is transferred to the first person to answer).

Conferencing – Creating a conference call is a critical business feature, particularly for organizations that interact with customers, consultants, and other external parties. Look for systems that allow you to conference up to 5 parties at a time. Also look for conferencing that allows the originator of the conference to exit the conference without disconnecting the other participants.

Speed Dial – Speed dial allows callers to assign commonly dialed numbers to a button on the handset. Pressing that button will then dial the number associated with that button.

Redial – Similar to speed dial, pressing the redial button on a handset will redial the last number called.

Auto-Attendant – The automated attendant often takes the place of a real receptionist. We've all interacted with auto-attendant before – they are the recorded messages you hear when you call a business that provide you with call routing options such as "press 3 to speak with someone in customer service."

Paging – Not necessarily a required feature, but a useful one when used appropriately, paging allows an employee to broadcast a message to the speaker of another handset.

Advanced Telephone System Capabilities

More and more businesses are focusing on a few advanced features that are providing significant benefits to them, including:

Location features – Many businesses want to make use of modern location features that allow a distributed workgroup in several cities or locations to operate as if they were all extensions to a single telephone system. These location features make these issues transparent and can even handle employees working from home or temporary locations without callers having any idea that employees are in different locations.

CTI – Computer Telephony Integration, or CTI, allows the telephone system and computers to interact. Allowing callers to click on a number displayed on their computer screen to dial that number is an example of CTI use. A more advanced example is integrating your new telephone system into a CRM application.

Find Me / Follow Me – Find me/Follow me service allows the telephone system to track down employees regardless of their location. For example, a salesperson may tell the telephone system to route inbound calls from his office line to his mobile telephone when he is on the road. More complex rule sets are easy to set up.

Unified Messaging (or UM) is the integration of different streams of communication (email, SMS, Fax, Voice, Video, etc.) into a single unified message store, accessible from a variety of different devices. While traditional communications systems delivered messages into several different types of stores—voicemail systems, e-mail servers, and stand-alone fax machines—with Unified Messaging all types of messages are stored in one system. Voicemail messages, for example, are delivered directly into your inbox. You see them right beside your e-mail when you open up Outlook, offering powerful new ways to collaborate more effectively. For example, you can forward a voicemail or fax. You can even take notes in your voicemail message or search for old voicemail messages. No more notes stuck to your monitor!

Pricing Telephone Systems – In isolation, a new PBX telephone system should cost a business between \$700 and \$1000 per user. But pricing options range very widely. You can choose monthly plans that are fixed and predictable in cost or you can buy a lot of expensive equipment outright. Both are good choices under different circumstances.

Per user price can drop significantly for larger companies who have more employees and must purchase a telephone system in isolation. Most end up purchasing new telephones and/or service packages that increase the total purchase price. Regardless of your decision, pay attention to total cost of ownership, again, over a 3 year cycle. Maintenance costs can hit you when you least expect them.

VoIP or (Voice over Internet Protocol) - This protocol is used for transmitting the human voice in digital form over the Internet or other networks as an audio stream, instead of using traditional telephone lines. VoIP uses the Internet Protocol (IP), but is not limited to communication by computer — even phone-to-phone communication can be conducted using this technology. This type of technology is commonly used for remote workers, telecommuting, or branch offices. It becomes very affordable when new IT infrastructure is deployed as sizing new switches and routers to handle VOIP is a fraction of the cost of deploying complete telephone systems in each office.

IT versus Telecom Vendor - This question is being raised more and more. Many IT vendors made the choice to begin delivering voice solutions to their clients through their relationships. Although some have done it well, the deployment of voice solutions is inherently different than the deployment of data solutions. Do not be the first or even 50th client to try. Be sure that your IT vendor has a large installed base of voice clients and has installed systems that are like your needs before heading down this road. Many IT vendors have gone down the voice road, only to make a U-turn within the first two years and move back to data only deployments. The same is true for voice vendors who have gone down the IT road. At this point our recommendation is to keep the expertise of each in your court and have them work together with the deployment.

For more information about any or all of these items, feel free to contact Falcon Communication Solutions, Inc. 703-335-5000 www.falconcom.net