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How to Make Yourself Reachable in 5 Places at Once

By LARRY MAGID

IN the quest to be always within reach, many people have resorted to carrying a cellphone at all times. But a cellphone isn't a perfect solution: for one thing, unless people know to call you on it, they may miss you by calling a land-line number instead. Even eliminating the land line at home won't necessarily help; callers may still miss you by dialing only your office phone.

But there are other ways to ensure that you are never out of touch no matter what phones you use. A variety of services are available that make it easy for callers to find you. These services can be particularly useful for families in which one member travels a lot, the children are away at school or elderly relatives need to stay in touch.

Setting up a personal toll-free number, for example, can give family members and friends a single, easy-to-remember number to call in an emergency, or for regular calls home from school or college. Those who think getting an 800 number is a big (and expensive) deal - something only appropriate for businesses - might be surprised at how cost-effective they can be, even for a family.

Having your own 800 (or 888, 877, 866 or 855, the other current toll-free area codes) number means that people can call you on your nickel, or maybe even for less than a nickel. Just about all long-distance carriers offer toll-free numbers but rates vary greatly. Some charge a monthly fee, some have a minimum usage. The cost per minute ranges from less than a nickel to more than a quarter.

One advantage to a toll-free number is that it is portable. Cellphone companies have until November 2003 to comply with a Federal Communications Commission rule that will give customers the right to keep their numbers if they change providers. Subscribers to toll-free services already have that right.

When you get a toll-free number, you don't get an extra phone line. Instead, the number rings through to your home, office cellphone or whatever other number you designate.

Some companies charge extra to ring to cellphones, pagers and other exchanges. A few companies won't let you ring to any numbers that aren't issued by one of the Baby Bell phone companies, like Verizon, SBC Communications or BellSouth. Many companies charge a premium for calls coming from Alaska, Hawaii, Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico or Canada.



The hardest part of setting up a toll-free account is figuring out prices and the best way to reach the providers. Your long-distance or local phone company probably offers the service, but there are also companies that offer toll-free numbers at a deep discount. Many of the low-cost providers sell through agents; some Web sites, like those of Cognigen Networks (<http://www.ld.net/>), Americom () and MicroCorp (<http://www.lddirect.com/>), can link you to agents for many of these providers. TollChaser.com, Discount Long Distance Digest (<http://www.thedigist.com/>) and WhoSells800.com have additional links as well as articles about the long-distance industry.

Agents sometimes offer lower rates than the company itself, and sometimes charge more. If you use an agent to set up a toll-free account with Unitel - <http://www.unitelgroup.com/> or (800) 499-5912 - for example, you might wind up paying a \$2 monthly service charge, but when I reached the company directly, there was no monthly charge.

At 3.9 cents a minute for state-to-state incoming calls, Unitel is among the least expensive, but calls within states vary widely. Californians pay the same 3.9 cents for calls originating in-state, but New Yorkers pay 7.9 cents a minute for in-state calls, while customers in New Mexico pay 19.8 cents a minute. The company has higher rates for calls to cellphones.

Kall8 - <http://www.kall8.com/> or (866) 222-1818 - charges 6.9 cents a minute for both interstate and intrastate calls as long as the call comes from the continental United States. There is no extra fee for cellphones or pagers. There is a fee starting at \$2 per month per line, but Kall8 offers automated services that aren't available from most companies. A subscriber can manage an account using the Web, including making instantaneous changes to the number that it rings to. Most other companies require you to make this request by phone or fax, and it can sometimes take minutes, hours or even days to make the switch, assuming you're able to reach them at all.

You can also opt for custom call routing so that calls ring at different numbers depending on the day of the week, time of day or where they are dialed from. You could have calls sent to your home phone on weekends and evenings, to your work number during the business day and to your cellphone when you're on the road. You can even automatically route calls from certain numbers, area codes or prefixes to voice mail that is delivered with your e-mail as an audio file. You can sign up for a Kall8 account from the company's Web site and have it active immediately.

For those who don't want to fool with an 800 number, call-forwarding services may be the answer.

Most telephone companies offer call-forwarding services, in which a call to your land line can be routed to any other number you choose, including a cellphone or pager. Verizon, for example, offers basic service for home phones at about \$3 to \$4 a month, depending upon the state you live in. Forwarding can be activated or deactivated, or the number changed, at any time from your home phone.

But there are some independent services that offer even more creative approaches to call forwarding. SimulRing - simulring.com or (206) 826-5600 - for example, solves the growing problem of having to give out multiple phone numbers. Instead of telling people your home number, work number and cellphone number, you can just give out your SimulRing number and let it track you down.

The company assigns you a local number that rings up to five phones at once. When someone calls your SimulRing number, you can pick it up regardless of whether you're at home, at work, on your cellphone or, in some cases, even a hotel room. By default, all your numbers ring at once, but they stop as soon as any of the lines is picked up.

The basic service costs \$9.95 a month and rings up to three lines. The deluxe service, which costs \$19.95, will ring up to five lines and allow you to configure your home line to require a family member to press 1 to accept the call - otherwise, the call continues to ring on your other numbers. Deluxe users can also program SimulRing to enter extensions to ring directly to an office or a hotel room. Local numbers are available only in New York, the San Francisco area, Southern California and the Seattle area. The company also offers a toll-free number that can be used anywhere in the country for an additional 10 cents a minute, or you can get an 800 number from another carrier and route it to your SimulRing number. The company's Web site allows you to instantaneously add or change phone numbers linked to your SimulRing account.

One added advantage of SimulRing is that most cellphones have caller ID, while many home phones do not. Since both phones ring simultaneously, you can look at your cellphone to see who is calling but pick up the call on your home phone.

Linx Communications - <http://www.linxcom.com/> or (888) 250-4700 - offers a similar service with additional features like the ability to set up a conference call, transfer calls to voice mail or to a colleague, or to redirect incoming faxes to any fax machine. Prices start at \$20 a month plus 6 cents a minute.