

## Some tips on shopping for smartphone service

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The cellphone industry's traditional way of doing business - locking customers into pricey two-year contracts - has been upended thanks to upstart major carriers T-Mobile and Sprint and a bunch of smaller providers that are giving consumers more options and different ways to customize their service.

That means [wireless carriers](#) are falling all over themselves trying to gain new customers, making it a good time to shop around.

In a new report on the wireless industry, Consumer Reports estimates that consumers on family plans who are spending more than \$200 monthly could take advantage of the new plans to save \$100 or more each month.

But with all the new options and plan permutations, consumers face almost too many choices. "It can be very, very hard to figure out," said Cameron Craig, who cofounded a website called WhistleOut to help people sort through their wireless options.

Here are some tips that Craig and other experts suggest will help you make a decision:

-Where will you use your [phone](#)? Root Metrics grades the service provided by the major carriers in particular metro areas and provides nationwide coverage maps. You can use those to see how strong the signals are likely to be at your house, your office and other popular

destinations. Note that many of the smaller carriers actually offer service over the major carriers' networks, so you can also use Root Metrics' service to evaluate their coverage as well.

Answering this question can also be helpful in picking a service plan. The difference between many plans these days is the amount of data they include. If you usually use your phone at home or the office, where it will be accessing the Internet through a Wi-Fi hotspot, you likely won't need all that much wireless data. If you are a road warrior who uses your phone mostly in the car, you may need more data than the average consumer.

-How will you use your phone? The carriers generally provide tools through their websites to track the number of minutes you spend talking on the phone, the number of texts you send and the amount of data you use each month. They also sometimes will show your average usage over a period of time. Take a look not only at the average amounts, but also your peak usage, because carriers sometimes charge hefty overage fees when users go over their limits.

If you're moving to a smartphone from a regular cellphone, Consumer Reports advises that most consumers can get by with about 1 to 2 gigabytes of data a month, particularly if they're conscientious about using Wi-Fi hot spots. However, consumers who are moving from a slower smartphone to one that connects to the Internet via the fast new LTE networks should expect to use up to 50 percent more data than before, says WhistleOut's Craig.

-Who will be on your plan? If you are buying service for more than one person, you can save money by signing up for a family plan from one carrier. Those plans typically offer discounted service for multiple phones, or allow consumers to share data.

T-Mobile, for example, is offering a special deal that provides unlimited voice minutes, texting and data for two people for \$100 a month total. That deal got the attention of Art Hernandez, who was shopping for a plan to cover himself and his son. He also plans to check out Sprint's deals.

"I heard those are the two that are basically the cheapest," said Hernandez, 69, of San Jose, Calif. "I don't use a cellphone much."

-What phone do you plan to use? You can save money by sticking with your current phone. But doing so can limit your choice of carriers; if you have an AT&T phone, you typically can't use it on Verizon's network, for example.

Also, some of the lower-cost networks have a much narrower range of available phones. So, if you have your heart set on the new iPhone 6 or the latest Samsung gadget, you may have to either pay full price for it or choose a different carrier.

-How do you want to pay for your phone? The carriers have been moving to separate their service charges from the cost of phones and in the process have given consumers some new options to pay for their devices. Many carriers offer what amounts to no-interest financing deals, which allow consumers to pay for their phones over a two-year period. While these deals are similar in practice to the old two-year plans, the big difference comes at the end of the two years. Under the old setup, you'd still be essentially "paying" for the phone, but with these new options your bill will be lower because you've paid off the phone. Sprint now offers customers the option of leasing their phones, promising to replace them with a new model every two years. The leasing charge is typically less than what consumers would pay on a financing plan, but consumers don't get to keep the phone at the end of the deal.

-Did you look for special deals or read the fine print? The wireless market is extremely competitive right now, with carriers offering new deals to lure in consumers, deals that could save you a good deal of money.

Sprint, for example, is offering to cut bills in half - not including the cost of a new phone - for consumers switching from Verizon or AT&T. T-Mobile is giving customers who sign up for certain plans 10 gigabytes of free data that they can use over the course of a year, rather than having their allotment reset at the end of each month. Both carriers are offering to pay the early termination fees of certain customers switching from other networks.

Note, though, that it's important to read through all the terms of the various offers to make sure you understand exactly what you are getting. If you want to be able to use your phone as a Wi-Fi hotspot, you may have to pay extra, depending on the carrier you choose. And some unlimited [data](#) plans actually slow down your download speeds after you use more than a certain amount.

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## THE WIRELESS MARKET

The cellular industry is dominated by the big carriers, but T-Mobile in particular has been gaining share in recent months.

Verizon: 125 million subscribers, about 35 percent of the market

AT&T: 118.7 million, 33 percent

Sprint: 55 million, 15 percent

T-Mobile: 52.9 million, 15 percent

U.S. Cellular: 4.7 million, 1 percent

Notes: Verizon's subscriber numbers are based on industry estimates. All figures except those of U.S. Cellular include customers of cellular companies whose services run on the major carriers networks.

## HELP FOR WIRELESS SHOPPERS

Online sites can provide help choosing among the myriad providers and plans.

-Consumer Reports. Regularly rates cellphones and service providers. Offers rankings of major carriers' services in 26 major cities, including San Francisco. Latest report provides service recommendations for five different types of [consumers](#). [www.consumerreports.org](http://www.consumerreports.org)

-Root Metrics. Rates smartphone service in numerous cities around the nation, including San Jose. Provides detailed coverage maps both nationally and in particular cities. [www.rootmetrics.com](http://www.rootmetrics.com)

-WhistleOut. Provides a comparison shopping service for smartphone plans. Lists both major and minor providers. Allows users to search for plans based on number of lines of service, usage and special features such as hotspot capability. [www.whistleout.com](http://www.whistleout.com)

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