

# T-Mobile, Sprint customers will be fine if the deals keep coming

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A year ago, my wife and I were still paying through the nose for two cellphone lines from Verizon Wireless that somehow consistently cracked the \$200 monthly barrier.

We made the switch to T-Mobile in September and quickly saw so many things for the better. We got lower rates—under \$100 of unlimited calls and data with no extra fees or taxes, the ability to make free calls in Mexico, text and use data in Japan at no extra charge, and get a mobile hot spot for those times when access to Wifi just wasn't there.

The network wasn't as great as Verizon—but my complaints were minimal. With savings like that, who cared?

The proposed mega-merger of T-Mobile and Sprint meant it was time to go back to the big four wireless carriers to compare pricing, and get a real sense of *deja vu*.

While the language may seem different, little has changed. the big two, Verizon and AT&T, continue to charge more and offer fewer benefits than scrappy No. 3 T-Mobile or No. 4 underdog Sprint.

The spin on the \$26 billion merger is that by combining, the wireless industry will be more competitive and the contenders can have more oomph to be ready for 5G, the next step in wireless that will be way stronger than the 4G we have today.

Maybe, maybe not.

But let's take a quick look at recent history, and the consumer-friendly innovations T-Mobile sold to us:

The Seattle-based company:

—Lowered rates and ushered in the return of unlimited data. That's what we had back in the early days of the smartphone revolution, only to see the carriers pull back on it when we started using it all the time.

—The end of the two-year contract, and the offer to buy out your current contract to switch.

—International data and texts.. T-Mobile offers the ability to make these in 140 countries at no additional charge. The speed is slower than back home, but it beats paying the average \$10 a day to use your phone internationally that Verizon quoted me on a Japan trip before I switched.

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—Monthly freebies, like T-Mobile's Netflix on the house. Sprint has free Hulu and AT&T complimentary HBO.

—No taxes or fees. Just the advertised rate.

Sadly, rates are still sky high for all the carriers, and it's really hard to compare their terms.

In a nutshell, for one line of service with unlimited data, Sprint is the lowest at \$65 monthly, followed by T-Mobile and Verizon at \$70 and \$75 for AT&T.

It's the add-ons and the bundles where you see the big difference.

A four-person Verizon family plan goes to \$160 with a free mobile hot spot, but it's one with limited data. If you want unlimited, you need to step up to the \$200 monthly plan—plus taxes and fees. Additionally, Verizon's unlimited plan is capped—meaning if you use too much of it, Verizon will cut back on your speed.

AT&T's family plan is \$180 without the hot spot, or \$210 with it, plus the free HBO. AT&T will also cut back on your speed "when the network is congested," the company says.

T-Mobile charges \$160 for 4 with the free hot spot, unlimited data, Netflix and free international data and texting

Sprint's family plan is a bargain priced \$100 for two lines, but additional lines are free and you get the free subscription to Hulu.

It doesn't take a brain surgeon to read through the plans and see which companies are giving consumers the most for their money.

Mergers tend to make companies less competitive, not more so, and those sweetheart deals that got them to the bargaining table can tend to disappear.

The proposed merger raises many questions. Will the two companies fight harder for your business? Will the Sprint network, traditionally the weakest, actually become competitive? And what becomes of all those thousands of retail T-Mobile and Sprint stores? Do they remain standalone, or will many shutter their doors?

Either way, we know most consumers care most about one bottom line: keep the add-ons coming and prices lower, and I stand with them.

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