



Countdown to Satisfaction: Top Considerations
in Choosing a Hosted VoIP Provider

Practical Guidance for Purchasing Hosted Voice Solutions

Practical Guidance for Purchasing Hosted Voice Solutions

Hosted solutions are becoming an increasingly popular choice as more companies adopt Voice over IP (VoIP) communications due to its inherent cost savings over traditional telephony and the added convenience of fully managed services. Industry statistics show that more than one-third of companies adopting VoIP choose hosted services—a number that will almost certainly increase as more companies become aware of this cost-saving, feature-rich, and scalable alternative to traditional and expensive phone services and equipment.

However, choosing a hosted VoIP provider is not without an element of risk. The service delivery method largely determines the voice call quality and creates a positive (or negative) experience. To help ensure hosted VoIP solution customer satisfaction, this brief whitepaper provides best-practice guidance in a countdown format for small and medium businesses (SMBs) that are considering hosted VoIP services.

Countdown Issue #5: Network and Voice Quality

Many providers offer hosted VoIP services that are targeted at SMBs, but not all providers are alike, nor are their services.

Many hosted VoIP providers tout a high-quality voice experience, but they neglect to inform potential customers that their voice traffic is quickly handed off to the public internet, where it is susceptible to jitter and packet-loss. Jitter and packet loss translate into echo and static that make for a distinctively low-quality call experience. In investigating potential providers, SMBs should look for quality indicators, including:

- **Private Secure MPLS Network**

The provider should carry voice traffic on its own private network to guarantee bi-directional voice quality. MPLS networks carry voice traffic over a private network, insulating calls from the unpredictability of Internet performance.

- **Quality of Service (QoS) with Dynamic Bandwidth Allocation**

The provider should guarantee a high level of QoS, using dynamic bandwidth allocation to ensure that voice traffic gets priority over any data traffic, thus minimizing packet loss. QoS capabilities are native on MPLS networks.

Countdown Issue #4: Cloud-based, Fully Managed Services

Premise-based phone systems that require each phone to be individually programmed are fast becoming a thing of the past. Instead, phone features can now be delivered via the “cloud.” This means that the service provider hosts voice features on its network—such as simultaneous ring (follow me), call forwarding options, and music on hold. In addition, it is now possible to integrate calling with popular applications—such as Microsoft® Outlook and Salesforce®. Cloud-based delivery provides numerous benefits, including:

- **Transparent upgrades**

New features and capabilities are delivered transparently via the service provider’s network, instead of being programmed into each phone. Easy online access is provided to manage users and features.

- **New technology without capex**

SMBs can benefit from technological innovation, without incurring ongoing capital expense. Feature delivery is incumbent on the service provider; therefore, SMBs can focus on their primary business objectives instead of their phone systems. They can also take advantage of the latest features without having to work with a PBX vendor to upgrade their existing phone systems.

- **Reliable service**

Hosted services ensure business continuity if an SMB’s physical facilities are damaged or destroyed. Critical capabilities—such as auto attendants and voicemail—are still available in the event of business disruption because they are cloud based instead of on premise. In addition, all traffic to a specific location can easily be forwarded to a different location, as needed.

Countdown Issue #3: A Turnkey Solution That Is Easy to Administer

Hosted VoIP solutions require equipment installation—such as IP phones and other minimal customer premise-based equipment (CPE)—at each location. The service provider should offer customers the option of installing the equipment themselves in addition to the option of sending a certified technician to do the job. Having phones and CPE equipment professionally installed ensures that your phones will work when the installer leaves the site.

Once the system is up and running, its management should be easily handled from a single, internal point. A simple online portal should be available, allowing an administrator to quickly execute moves, additions, and changes. Employees should have access to their own portals for easy individual phone configuration. Ideally, the provider handles everything else—including security, bandwidth utilization, and network monitoring—remotely.

Top Issue #2: Advanced Security Services without Additional Customer Premise Equipment

Because SMBs rely on the free flow of voice and data communications, they need assurance that they are safeguarded from security threats—such as viruses and spam—and are protected from network outages. Therefore, the provider should:

- **Proactively monitor the network**

The service provider should support and proactively monitor its data, voice, and security services on a 24 / 7 / 365 basis from multiple redundant network and security operations centers. Dedicated support and infrastructure ensures that the network services perform to their maximum potential, and customers receive the best possible technical support.

- **Deliver network-based security**

The service provider should offer a comprehensive managed cloud-based security services suite. Components—all of which are managed and maintained by the provider—should include:

- o Managed firewall
- o Intrusion protection
- o Anti-virus/anti-spyware protection
- o Anti-spam filtering
- o Web filtering
- o Personal protection suite for individual users

Top Issue #1: Service, Service, Service

The chosen service provider should deliver more than just a high-performance, highly secure converged voice and data network. It should also focus on meeting service needs of SMBs and having a customer orientation that goes beyond offering a “cookie cutter” solution to all customers.

Large carriers do sell hosted services to SMBs, but their real focus is on large enterprise businesses. At the other end of the managed services spectrum are small “boutique” providers that offer hosted services under a Bring Your Own Bandwidth (BYOB) model, where customers arrange for the installation of network links and equipment. This model does not provide the benefits of a provider’s dedicated MPLS network or support for network-based QoS and managed security services.

Key service-focused criteria to look for include:

- **An Enterprise-grade solution that scales**

Look for a service provider that offers converged voice and data services to take advantage of efficiencies and cost savings. Also look at the service model. Does the service provider offer a true turnkey solution? Does the provider offer the equipment, service, and support for the entire solution—including professional installation? Does the service provider offer network-based managed security services? How extensive is the provider's MPLS network, if available? Does the provider offer QoS assurances?

- **Professional services, including project management**

It is highly desirable for the provider to have a national professional services organization that has strong, dedicated expertise in technical issues, service delivery, change management, and project management. A smooth deployment is essential, particularly for an SMB whose IT personnel are typically under-resourced.

- **Flexible access and feature options**

SMB customers should be able to choose the type of Internet access that their locations require, along with flexible feature and calling packages tailored to the needs of their individual users. Look for providers that include unlimited local calling and features—such as hunt groups and voicemail. Some providers charge separately for these features, which can significantly add to the monthly bill.

MegaPath Delivers Hosted VoIP Services Designed for SMBs

MegaPath Hosted Voice is the ideal solution for businesses with one or multiple locations. It is an enterprise-grade, cloud-based IP phone service that provides all employees with a unified phone system that offers the same business features in every location. Hosted Voice is available nationwide and includes either T1 or SDSL access.

MegaPath Hosted Voice leverages a dedicated MPLS VPN network to provide crystal clear voice quality and reliable call stability. In addition, it can help companies achieve significant cost savings. With no expensive PBX equipment to lease, purchase, or maintain, MegaPath's hosted VoIP solution costs up to 50% less per employee than a traditional PBX or key system, and it offers more essential business features.

MegaPath gives companies a choice of affordable phones, features, and calling plans. In addition, it provides all of the advanced IP features, so companies don't have to worry about technology obsolescence. MegaPath can also work with existing telephone systems, allowing companies to migrate to IP at their own pace.

MegaPath Hosted Voice includes:

- A fully managed total IP phone system
- Low up-front capital expenditure and a predictable monthly expense
- Network-based Quality of Service (QoS) for clear voice service and built-in security
- Advanced IP business features on every phone, in every location
- Easy-to-use online portal to simplify system and individual phone management
- Flexible plans and system configurations
- Selection of popular IP phones and enterprise-grade equipment
- Professional installation (optional) and support

Please visit www.megapath.com for more information about how MegaPath can meet your company's needs for hosted VoIP services.