

# Daily Southtown

## Sometimes, there *is* a free lunch

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It's often said that there's no free lunch, but I'm happy to report that for telephone customers, there are some free services that can make your life easier—and your bills cheaper if you know how to take advantage of them.

I'll be the first to admit that changes in the telephone industry have wreaked havoc on consumers. Since the break up of the old AT&T, phone rates have become a lot more confusing and, for a lot of folks, more expensive.

But the last 20 years also have brought an explosion of new technology and telecommunications services that are now giving consumers options to lower their phone bills.

Look at directory assistance. Back when it was free, those three magical numbers were a phone user's best friend, but dialing 411 today can cost you an arm and a leg. AT&T's 411 service costs \$1.25 a call, while information calls on your cell phone can cost even more.

Free information service on the Internet has been available for years, via websites like [www.anywho.com](http://www.anywho.com) or the various yellow and white pages available online. But what if you're one of the 94 million Americans who don't have Internet access or what if you're in the car when you need to look up a number?

Free directory assistance is now available over the phone as well, by dialing 1-800-FREE-411 or 1-800-411-METRO. So far, reviews of the new services are positive. You have to listen to a short commercial before you get your number, but after that, the number is provided at no charge.

A similar service, which provides the name and address attached to a phone number is also available for free. For years, the service, known as reverse directory, was only available from the phone company by dialing 796-9600. AT&T now provides the same service through 411, but each call costs \$1.99.

A Google search for reverse directory gives you several free options, including [www.anywho.com](http://www.anywho.com), [www.reversephonedirectory.com](http://www.reversephonedirectory.com), and [www.infospace.com](http://www.infospace.com). As far as I know, the service is not yet available over the phone for free, but that can't be far behind.

Another often overlooked feature for—yes—saving money can be your cell phone. At CUB, we often see consumers paying huge prices for long-distance service, even though they make very few long-distance calls. At the same time, they may be paying for unused minutes on their cell phones.

By the time you add up the monthly fee and all the taxes and surcharges, a typical long-distance bill can be \$8 to \$10 a month, for just a few minutes of calling. Most cell phone plans now come with virtually free long distance, so if you want to save a few bucks on your phone bill, consider dropping your long-distance plan altogether and using your cell phone to make those calls. Of course, check with your cell provider to make sure long-distance is included in your plan.

The same advice holds true for local toll calls, local calls between 15 and about 40 miles from your home. At 16 cents a minute on AT&T's standard rates, these are some of the most expensive calls around. But, if you've got extra minutes on your cell phone plan, consider using them for your local toll calls.

Finally, there's been a lot of talk lately about Internet phone service. It's not for everyone, but if you're already paying for high-speed Internet access you may want to check out a new service that is offering free phone calls to anywhere in the United States or Canada through the end of the year.

The service, called Skype, is actually free software that can be downloaded on to your computer. Once it's hooked up, you can start calling through a headset or an Internet-adapted phone with no additional charges. After the free promotion ends, calls are free to anyone, anywhere in the world, if they also have the service and are as low as 2 cents a minute if they don't, making this a particularly attractive service for international callers.

While none of these tips will erase your phone bill altogether, it's still nice to know you can get something for nothing. After all, when something's free, the price is right.