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What, Me Worry? Consumers Still Cutting the Landline Cord




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An AT&T outage left many in the Midwest without cell phone coverage Sunday. It was a fresh reminder of how cell phones can sometimes be less reliable than landlines. However, consumers continue to give up landline service in growing numbers and go completely wire-free.

Even when his cell phone offered no bars on Sunday and he had no other way to get a dial tone, Carlton Smith did not second-guess his 21st Century decision to cancel traditional landline phone service in his house.


Smith was one of the many victims of a service outage that affected [AT&T](#) (NYSE: T)  Wireless customers across the Midwest all day Sunday. The 35-year-old father of two called the experience frustrating, and he was disappointed in how AT&T handled the outage. But he wasn't worried.

"We figured it was a cell problem and it would clear up," he said.

It did. And while a day without cell phone service may feel like a day without oxygen for many, all the indications are that a sporadic outage like Sunday's will not slow a trend that is well under way: More people, particularly younger adults, are cutting home phone service to go wireless only.

Cutting Costs

In fact, as the recession deepens and money-saving strategies become the talk of the nation, more people are willing to cut home phone service, surveys indicate.

Nearly a third of the people who responded to a [Sprint](#) (NYSE: S)  survey in December said

they were willing to cut their landline phone and rely only on a [wireless phone](#) to save money. Already, 17.5 percent of U.S. households -- roughly 1 out of every 6 -- don't have a landline, according to new data from the National Health Interview Survey, a part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Just three years ago, the number of wireless households was about 7 percent.

"We didn't really re-think our strategy of not having a home phone," said Smith, who lives in suburban Detroit, the epicenter of the outage. "With the big wind storm we were having, I figured that was why. Our landline phone went out in the past when there was a big storm, too."

The problems were caused by severe weather and high winds in Michigan, said Meghan Roskopf, a spokesperson for AT&T. Backup power did turn on, she said, but there was a delay before that kicked in.

Coverage problems persisted from about 9:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. in Chicago. The outages were intermittent, so some calls were affected and others were not. Also, the problem did not disrupt AT&T's Internet or home phone service, she said.

Keeping a Backup

Not everyone will cut the cord, however.

Reasons include call clarity, concerns about reaching emergency services and, for some people, needing a landline phone to buzz people into an apartment building.

"I've come close to going wireless only," said Jim Porrett, a 35-year-old business analyst from suburban Beach Park, who had intermittent service on his iPhone Sunday. "But I'm still keeping it just for this reason."

Porrett uses his iPhone for most calls, including long-distance, because he has basic home phone service. But he considers his home phone a backup that he uses only occasionally.

Rachel Benoit, a 34-year-old Logan Square resident, has no intentions of getting rid of her landline.

"The connection quality is better, the sound quality is better," she said.

Benoit also is unsatisfied with the quality of her Internet-based calling system at work. Her home phone is better and because her firm offers telecommuting hours, she often uses the home phone for business calls.

"Besides, I like holding the phone with my neck while I talk," Benoit said. "You can't do that with a cell phone."

The Wireless Life

People who cut the cord tend to be younger, single and renters. The December National Health Interview Survey found that 35.7 percent of adults ages 25 to 29 lived in households with only [wireless phones](#). Further, 63.1 percent of adults living with unrelated roommates lived in wireless-only households.

Only 9.2 percent of adults between 45 to 64 lived in wireless-only households, and just 2.8 percent of adults over 65 did so.

Meredith Oliver, 30, is single and doesn't have a landline. He cut the cord five years ago "when everyone started calling me on my cell phone. They knew that was the best way to reach me."

"There are the occasional blips in coverage," he said, "but nothing negative has happened to me in the five years since I've cut the cord."

At work, the commercial [real estate broker](#) uses a landline for calls and he admits he prefers the call quality. But with a Bluetooth connection built into his car, "I can get in a lot of conversations" as he drives to and from work or to check out a site for a client.

Location Awareness

The Citizens Utility Board, a watchdog for phone service, said the choice to cut the cord is an individual decision.

"We don't recommend people cut the cord, but we don't discourage it either," said Dave Kolata, executive director. "Wireless service quality is not as good yet as landline, but it's improving."

People should consider wireless phone services have more outages "and you get more dropped calls than you do with landline phones," he said.

Also, there are still some issues with emergency services, he notes, particularly when you get farther away from dense urban areas.

Federal rules mandate that 95 percent of the phones from wireless carriers are "E911-capable" - or "location-capable" -- so callers can be found if they dial emergency services. These rules are being implemented and will get more stringent by 2012. The majority of new mobile phones are location-capable.

"You should be aware of the risks if you want to cut the cord," Kolata said. "If you call emergency services from a landline, they will know exactly where you are."

But on cell phones, that signal is "triangulated" based on the location of the phone and cell towers. In "dense urban areas, that should be a matter of feet" but it can be less accurate the farther away one is from a city, he said.

'What Are the Chances?'

Chicagoan Steven Winkler, 43, has a practical reason for cutting the cord: money.

Five years ago, when he was working two jobs, "I was never home. It didn't make sense to be paying two bills."

Now he has one job but he did not go back to the landline. He admits there are times that "for whatever reason, I can't make a cell phone call, but you get used to it."

He has [Skype](#) to make Internet phone calls, "but the call quality is not good," he said. "It is just a backup."

He uses [Comcast](#) (Nasdaq: CMCSK) for Internet service and Sprint for his mobile phone.

"What are the chances that my cell phone and my Internet will go out at same time?" Then he laughed, hoping he didn't just jinx himself. [ECT](#)

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