

It's good to talk, but are the phone companies **listening to their customers**, asks Brain Clegg.

# Phone improvement



It has been said (by me) that the three things a good manager needs most are creativity, communication skills and knowledge. The same is true of a business, and these are very interesting times for communications. I'm not

talking about the internet, or whizzy new technology to wallop information down the line at hectic speeds, but a total change in the way telecommunications companies operate, which potentially affects every serious PC user. Since time immemorial, unless you live in Hull, British Telecom (aka the Post Office) was the only name you needed to know. A few years ago, the position began to alter. Mercury entered the scene. Cable companies made offers you couldn't refuse. Mobile telephones stopped being a small briefcase with a handset attached and started to be practical. Yet this is chicken-feed to what is on the way. Because BT, like the gas and electricity suppliers, has been forced to allow others to use its physical connections end to end. Take two hopefuls from either side of the business spectrum:

Free Telecom, and Cable and Wireless.

**Free Telecom** has a cracking idea. What do people complain about when comparing BT with US telephone companies? Often it's the lack of free local calls. Free Telecom offers free country-wide calls. There has to be a catch? Well, yes and no. Your calls are paid for by advertising. At the time of writing, this could be anything from a shortish ad every few minutes to an interactive questionnaire up front, then maybe half an hour's free chat. Will it work? I really don't know until I try it. But it's a brilliant concept that couldn't have emerged without the freeing up of the telephone network. You can find out more at [www.freetelecom.com](http://www.freetelecom.com).

**The communications giant** Cable and Wireless has also found a crack in BT's armour. Going to an alternative provider used to involve new contracts, dialling special numbers and generally making a simple service difficult to get into and even harder to get out of. Cable and Wireless is marketing a box that you put between your phone and the wall. When it is plugged in, your calls go via Cable and Wireless; when it isn't, they go via BT — simple as that. You pay a small quarterly

rental for the box, but this is accompanied by several hours of free local calls and discounts on longer-range dialling. It's the ease of stopping and starting that makes the Cable and Wireless deal so attractive. See [www.business-made-simpler.co.uk](http://www.business-made-simpler.co.uk) for more details.

**So how is BT** reacting to this real competition?

A couple of weeks ago, I would have said 'badly'. I work from home, with two lines into the house, one for business, one for domestic use. I never got a very good connection speed on my modem, which I put down to my rural location, but eventually it sunk in that BT hadn't provided me with two lines at all. They used a splitter box (a DACS to its friends) to shove two channels down a single wire. Result — degraded electronic communications. I rang up my friendly BT customer service person. 'That's right,' she said, 'we don't recommend using a DACS for computer connection.' I pointed out that I didn't ask for a DACS. 'We have no obligation to provide anything more than a voice service,' she said. 'If they put a DACS in, it was because there was no alternative.' In effect, if it doesn't work, tough. Then, to add insult to injury, she

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tried to sell me Business Highway instead.

If that had been the end of the story, I would conclude that BT hadn't got a clue about customer service and was ripe for the picking. However, there was a happy ending. A week later, an engineer turned up unannounced. 'I'm here to switch you over to two lines,' he said, proving that the DACS hadn't been installed as there was no alternative, as I had been told. The DACS disappeared, my modem speed nearly doubled and BT sailed back into my good books. I'm not saying BT won't lose custom: obviously it will when faced with competition that includes cheaper or even free calls. But making such responsiveness commonplace would give the newcomers a real run for their money.

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