



The SMB's Guide to Business VoIP Vendors

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Introduction

The Importance of a Business VoIP Phone System

Choosing the right phone system for your business is an asset which not only delivers tangible returns on costs, but also boosts productivity and collaboration within your company. With a properly integrated communications system, small-to-medium-sized businesses can also increase efficiency and effectively scale future growth. Keeping this in mind, it is extremely important that your business spends a considerable amount of time investigating the potential options and deliberate over the right questions to ask, in order to shortlist the best vendors that are available.

Considerations Before Choosing a Vendor

In our guide, we will provide you with useful information and tips that you can use to outline and plan for your business' unique vendor needs. First, we will provide you with a primer on VoIP; what is it and why is it important. Then we will help you briefly outline the three most important questions an SMB has when defining their communication project scope. Next, we will walk you through how to select a vendor and present some reasons why going 'big box' isn't always the best bet. By the end of this guide, you should be able to confidently select a vendor that will best suit your needs. Whether you are just interested in seeing what expansion options exist for your current system or if you are brand new to the world of business phones, follow our guidelines to help you create a cohesive road map to business phone success.



What is VoIP?

When you're busy running a business, you want to find the best solution for whatever issue is at hand without getting a bigger headache along the way. It can be tough to keep track of the best ways to communicate with your staff, vendors, and clients. At this very moment, in fact, you may be staring at your computer screen, asking yourself: **What is VoIP?**

A quick Google search for "what is VoIP" yields results with words such as circuit-committed protocols, discrete packets, IP telephony, and audio codecs. You may be asking yourself, "what does any of that mean"?

How VoIP works



DID YOU KNOW:

VoIP can cut initial startup costs for a new business by up to 90%.

Let's start off with the word VoIP itself.

With daily advancements in technology, many businesses are opting to use internet in place of a traditional phone company. **VoIP stands for Voice Over Internet Protocol**, but in more common terms it simply means connecting your phone service over the internet.

So how does it work?

During the normal course of business, we're sure you send emails, browse web pages, and maybe even started the Google search that led you here. Each of these activities require an internet connection and some sort of information exchange behind the curtains.

The case is no different with VoIP. When you pick up your phone and place a call, your voice is converted into digital data that is sent over the internet. It's that easy!

One thing to keep in mind when considering VoIP is that you don't necessarily even need a phone anymore. The beauty of our connected world allows us to access internet communication not just in the office, but also at an off-site job, during an out-of-town business meeting, or maybe even while your vacation in another country.

Okay, but what makes it so special?

Traditional phone systems are notoriously expensive, painful to upgrade, require an IT staff to manage, and keeps you chained to your desk. VoIP tends to have all of the features you've come to expect with a traditional phone system, but it truly shines with a unique set of application based functions. Now, you have the flexibility to customize a system suited to your business' individual needs.



DID YOU KNOW:

VoIP technology existed as early as 1973, but it didn't take its place in business phone technology until 1995.

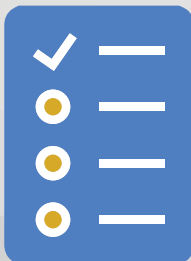
Defining Your Scope

If you're preparing for a total phone system overhaul or are entirely new to the game, keep in mind that VoIP is highly customizable and some configurations will probably suit your business better than others. Before you start browsing through phone system specifications or reading lengthy contracts, it is critical that you and your team have fully outlined and planned for your business' unique needs.



3 Questions A SMB Owner Needs to Consider When Defining Their Scope:

- Why are you planning to upgrade?
- What are your needs and limitations?
- Which features do you and your team want or need the most?



These key questions will help you plot a course for your business phone system's future!

To download the entire "The Ultimate Business Phone Checklist," [click here](#).

Why?

What's motivating you to change your phone system in the first place? Is it a change in your location or your staff's size? Is your need for a change related to problems with your current provider? These are all valid reasons to make the switch, but different problems have different solutions, and one size may not fit all!

What?

What are your priorities, and what limits you from fulfilling them? Questions like these may relate to things like budgetary concerns, the number of lines you will need, whether you want to buy or rent your equipment, your on-staff IT capabilities, remote or multi-site needs, and the state of your current internet service.

Which?

Now for the fun part: it's time to customize your ideal VoIP business solution! What features strike you as the most useful and desirable? Look into solutions with intercom, call parking, auto-call attendants, third party integrations, and more. Every VoIP provider offers a different array of options, so don't be afraid to shop around!



Vetting Your VoIP Vendor

As the owner of a small-to-medium sized business, you often have to balance the day-to-day needs of your operation, while also planning for the future success of your company. Selecting the best VoIP vendor for your business is no different; you will need to prioritize the needs you have today with a provider who can offer flexibility as your company changes down the line.

In this section, we will outline some of the top factors you should consider when evaluating a SMB phone solution.



Solution Offerings

During your research into a new system, you likely encountered a few different types of VoIP solutions such as cloud hosted or premise based. Some providers may only focus on one specific deployment model, while many other vendors offer a variety of solutions to fit your individual needs.

The ultimate value of premise based or cloud hosted VoIP system is entirely dependant on what would benefit your individual business the most. If you have made your mind up already on which type of system you want for your business, you should be able to cross any vendor off your list that doesn't provide that model of service.



Cost

While the type of VoIP solution you choose will naturally dictate what you can expect to pay, an overall cost comparison of potential vendors can help you narrow down your list even further. For example, if you select a cloud hosted solution you will likely be paying a recurring monthly fee based on the number of lines you have in service. Ask potential vendors for their cost per user to easily see how they stack up.

When considering your budget, it is also crucial to factor in any requirements you will have in the future. Planning to expand operations and hire eight new employees next year? You will want to determine how these additional users impact your monthly bill. What if you have to let three employees go? You will want to ask if you can remove these phone lines from your bill or if you will be responsible for a certain number lines for your contract duration.



Installation & Training

During your process of selecting a vendor, installation assistance may or may not be a critical need. If you have an in-house IT team, they will likely be able to handle a lot of the heavy work. If you are a small company or planning to rely on cloud services, finding a vendor who provides more than just a box of phones will be critical for your company's communication.

How about training? With a brand new phone system comes a brand new set of functions your team will need to learn in order to communicate effectively. You may want to consider a vendor who not only provides a comprehensive initial onboarding, but also a partner who is dedicated to offering ongoing training support as new features become available or as new employees are added to your organization.



Equipment Inventory

Does your business operate seasonally? Do you have big plans to scale your operations? Depending on the type of business you operate, you might need to quickly acquire new phone system equipment at the drop of a hat.

When you are in the process of selecting a vendor, you should consider asking if they keep an in-house inventory of equipment or if they need to purchase items as needed. Waiting for shipping can mean the difference between a delayed workforce and an optimized one.

Find a VoIP vendor that allows you to grow confidently by increasing (or decreasing) your system as your needs change, from one line to thousands



Management & Monitoring of System

When selecting a VoIP vendor, you will want to pay special attention to the post-installation service they offer. If you are managing your own system on-premise, the vendor will probably be hands-off. With a cloud system, your provider should offer automatic feature upgrades, 24/7/365 monitoring, handle ongoing maintenance, and use redundant data centers to ensure everything's running smoothly.

In the event of a power failure or other business-impacting events, calls can be automatically routed to alternative phones or voicemail. Any communication disruption can massively impact your business' daily operations and damage long-term success. The vendor you select should confidently understand that the quicker you're back up to normal, the better your business can perform overall.

4 Reasons Going “Big Box” Might Be Bad For Business

Now that you have a better understanding of VoIP, defined a project scope road map, and identified the critical considerations to selecting a vendor, you are just about ready to sign that contract! Before you can get started on your overhaul, however, you have a big hurdle to hop over: which VoIP provider should you turn to for your new phone service?

Your first impulse might be to reach for a big-name provider like 8x8, Cox Communications, or RingCentral, but don't go striking up deals right off the bat! Just because a company has made it big, that doesn't mean they're right for you.

1. “Nationally recognized service providers take in more revenue and get more exposure, so that means they can lower their prices more than a smaller, local business could.”

While this might be the natural assumption to make, it isn't always correct! The packages offered by some service providers may seem like resource-savers at first sight, but pitfalls like these have the potential to outweigh the value of your initial savings.

Incentives are not always what they seem:

- Many nationally recognized VoIP providers entice potential buyers into deals with the promise of free softphones and hardware, but unwary buyers end up paying for those “freebies” in the form of binding contracts and expensive subscription fees
- Some companies charge a monthly \$20 at minimum per user. This might be a steal for some small enterprises, but medium subscribers put themselves at financial risk when enrolling for flat fees like this
- If you run into unforeseen business circumstances or need to reduce overhead costs, you most likely won't have the option to cancel your VoIP service contract until your contractual obligation to your provider runs out

2. “If I’m paying so much for a VoIP service contract, that must mean that it’s superior to other providers, right?”

Sorry, that isn’t always accurate either! While some companies are known to follow up on their promises, other offer products and services that are full of bugs. This isn’t a problem with VoIP itself, so much as it’s a problem with their individual service provider.

Common complaints among dissatisfied VoIP users:

- Poor or choppy audio quality
- Sudden loss of service
- Total system failures
- Cookie-cutter tech without any consideration for variant internet speeds, wiring, or system compatibility



3. “Okay, so a glitchy product might be annoying to use, but bigger enterprises always boast about their great customer service. That should balance the bugs out, right?”

International VoIP enterprises have huge customer pools, and this means that they’re representatives are super busy all the time! Even if you give them the benefit of the doubt, they simply don’t have the capacity to form a genuine business-to-business relationship with you like a smaller, local one could.

Potential “Big Box” customer service scenarios:

- You’ll only speak to the sales reps and IT guys you ring up at big VoIP companies once and never hear from them again.
- You’ll waste your time wading through automated directories and robo-calls
- You’ll even run the risk of an unpleasant chat with a rude hotline operator!

4. “Given everything I know about VoIP providers now, the logical conclusion is that all hope is lost, and I should just stick to a traditional phone system?”

So everything before this was the bad news. Now, here’s the good news: you’re wrong again (and for once, that’s a good thing, we promise!). It’s true, big corporations don’t always have the capacity to form personal relationships with their clients, but not all VoIP providers are corporate goliaths.

What to expect when you go local:

- Because local businesses operate on a smaller scale, they can handle individual cases with a great deal of thought and care
- Many of them forgo contracts altogether to protect their customers best interests
- In the event of downsizing or sudden growth spurts, you can easily add or remove additional users with no complications
- Local representatives are often able to assess their clients’ needs in person and set them up with devices that genuinely suit their needs



What RI Telephone Offers As A Vendor

Rhode Island Telephone has been providing world-class cloud hosted and premise-based business phone solutions for small & medium businesses over the past 25 years. No matter how complex your requirements, we are confident that we can find a cost-effective communications solution to fit any budget or specifications.

Our full-service organization is backed by our team of dedicated factory trained & certified field technicians, and our factory certified technical support team. As a small business ourselves, we are committed to offering the same enterprise-level service that the big businesses receive, without the enterprise-level price tag.

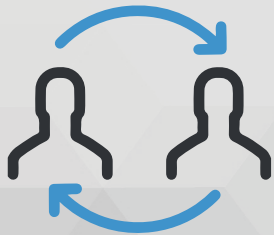


For a look at how we stack up to other VoIP vendors, take a look at the comparison chart below:

	RI Telephone	BigBox.com	
Solution Offerings	Wide Variety	Limited Selection	We offer both premise based and cloud hosted systems. As experts in both, we provide you with the solution that works best for you.
Cost	Competitive	Sometimes Cheaper	Many web-based VoIP providers can offer cheaper rates, but beware of hidden charges not included in your quote.
Solution Installation	On Site	Not Available	The other guys ship you a box of phones without any consideration for compatibility. Our trained technicians have experience installing hundreds of system from start to finish.
Network Installation	Available	Not Available	As a licensed and insured RI Telecom Contractor, we can provide full installation services for computer outlets, switches, and routers.
Training	On Site	Phone/ Web-Based	When you purchase a new system, our team will personally walk you through training on-site. Free updated training is available at any time.
Service	On Site	Not Available	If you are experiencing issues, the other guys expect you to take care of it on your own. We will come to your business site to troubleshoot if necessary.
System Management	Included	Not Included	If you do not have the expertise (or time) to oversee your own system, we will manage all aspects at no extra charge.
Remote Monitoring	Included	Not Included	All of our systems are located in redundant data centers and monitored 24/7/365 to ensure your communication runs smoothly.

At Rhode Island Telephone, we understand how to make your migration simple and painless - and cut costs off your bottom line. Whether you are starting from scratch, preparing for an overhaul, or looking for support, we have the tools necessary to equip SMB's with fully-customized business phone solutions that seamlessly streamline current and future communication channels.

While this may only be the beginning of your journey to a new phone system, our skilled technicians can provide more customized answers to your questions.



[Request a free quote](#) to find out more about our SMB VoIP solutions.

