

Previewing the phones of the future

One of the extra benefits that comes to legislators is the opportunity to attend meetings and seminars on subjects as different as delinquency and deregulation. Last week I took advantage of one such meeting. The topic was telephone technology. It is not a topic that will affect us as consumers immediately, but according to Longmeadow's Geoff Little of Telitcom, it will change our lives in a few years. The lesson of the day was, to paraphrase a television advertisement, "This is not your father's phone system!"

It seems that competition in long distance telephone service was only the first of many options we will all face in our phone systems in the future. Presentations were made by three companies that are developing Personal Communications Services (PCS). As someone who is still learning to deal with a car phone, I found that presentations amazing. This is what they said about the phone of the future.

Auctions were held in Washington, D.C. this year for the rights to use a new band of radio frequencies for the new phone technology. The auction of airwaves made a \$17 billion profit for the federal government, an indication of the growth potential in the new field. ATT Wireless, Sprint PCS and Omnipoint won those rights for our region. Those companies will compete like long distance carriers do today

Phones for the new systems will be both cordless and portable, but not like today's cell-based cordless phones and portable cellular phones. They will be the size of a small television remote control device with clear reception in any location.

Today's home cordless phones must be used near the base unit that is wired to a central point, and they still have more interference than wired units. Portables can lose clarity because of environmental factors, and calls may disconnect at certain geographic locations. If you listen to talk radio, you know that cellular callers are occasionally disconnected when a tunnel interrupts the signal. Anyone who tries to use a car phone as I do, while driving to Boston, is familiar with a certain spot on the Turnpike where the signal fades out completely. One of the biggest factors limiting the use of cellular phones is the high cost of incoming or outgoing calls. Reducing those costs, of course, was a promised pan of the coming revolution in telephones.

One speaker envisioned a time when you could dial a person's number and have her pick up the phone at home in Springfield or on a ski slope in Switzerland. Another referred to Dick Tracy's wrist radio from the 1940s as a possible model for the telephone of the future.

I will admit that much of the talk sounded more like Star Trek than Nynex. And it might not come to pass. But then I thought of the way we have moved from ATT to New England Telephone to Nynex, Sprint and MCI. I would not have thought ten years ago that my home telephone could fax, communicate with the Internet and forward my calls to my phone from another location. If we have adjusted to all of those changes at the end of the twentieth century, who is to say we can't handle a few more as we begin the twenty-first?