

For prepaid customers, phones that won't give you away anymore

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Prepaid cellphones have long been an outlet for those without the money or credit rating to get a contract with one of the major mobile carriers. But the price for easy access to a cellphone has been junky products and calls made with an eye on the clock.



But because of some recent changes, people whose cellphone bills are hovering around \$100 a month can peek over the other side of the fence to see the grass suddenly getting greener. Prepaid specialists like Boost Mobile and Virgin Mobile USA have begun offering up much nicer phones in recent months, and something even bigger: they're creating rate plans that make it easier to use those phones as much as you want, while paying far less than you would on one of the Big Four networks.

In short, if you're among those worrying about your monthly bills, it may well make sense to take a hard look at one of these offers.

Not that you'll have an easy time avoiding them. Boost, which is a division of Sprint, is in the midst of introducing a big advertising program to support its newest plan: \$50 for unlimited monthly calls, texts and Web use, with no roaming fees, activation charges or other add-ons.

It sounds a lot like Sprint's "Unlimited Everything" plan, for which the company charges \$100 monthly, and it is — with some caveats. First, you can't get Sprint's turn-by-turn navigation feature — or anything like it — on Boost, nor can you get some of their other high-end services, like Sprint TV.

Since Boost uses Sprint's network, you would be wise to check with your friends, relatives and Web sites like DeadCellZones.com and CellReception.com to see how well the company covers your area. In my suburban Connecticut neighborhood, for instance, Sprint's signal is a bit patchy.

If you clear that hurdle, another one awaits. Boost's \$50 plan mostly makes sense for those who use their phones for lots of calling and texting. The wireless Web component sounds nice, but Web pages on the company's phones render at a painfully slow pace, and the phones' smallish screens aren't anything you would want to look at for long.

Boost is hoping to change that with the introduction this week of the Motorola Stature i9, which costs \$300. This slick-looking flip phone features a 3.1-megapixel camera, Bluetooth, walkie-talkie capability and a fairly big screen. But again, with the sluggishness of Boost's Web connection, this won't be anything worthy of scrapping your iPhone.

If you can wait until you get back to your desk to catch the latest ESPN highlights or Hulu reruns, though, this is a good option. And because you don't sign a contract for this plan, you're not locked into anything.

Let's say you've signed on to the new Boost plan and you run short of cash the next month. If you pay \$40 instead of \$50, Boost automatically charges you its standard calling and texting rates — 10 cents a minute. If you can make the \$50 payment next month, Boost bumps you back into the unlimited category.

At \$50, Boost's plan is a considerable step up for the market. MetroPCS and Cricket, which operate in various American cities, have similar offers, but users pay roaming charges for calls made outside those areas. Virgin Mobile USA, another prepaid carrier that operates on Sprint's network, does not charge for roaming, but its cheapest monthly plan is \$35, and it charges \$100 for unlimited voice, texting and mobile Web use.

Perhaps in response to Boost's offer, Virgin recently improved the features of its monthly plan. Now, all calls made after 7 p.m. are free, and Virgin dropped the \$5 fee for unlimited calls made to other Virgin Mobile users. And given the cellphone carriers' long history of price parity, don't be surprised if Virgin and other carriers drop their prices for unlimited plans in the future.

Even with Boost's latest Motorola handset, Virgin has a better array of phones. At the high end, Virgin said this week that it would soon begin selling the Kyocera X-tc, a big-screen slider phone with a qwerty keyboard for messaging, for about \$100.

The X-tc will join another recent release, the Shuttle, a nifty slider camera phone with a video recorder and a decent music player, for \$100. And Virgin's Helio division, which is for traditional two-year contract customers, recently released the Ocean 2, a \$149 (with contract) multimedia device that is packed with features. Robert Stohrer, Virgin Mobile USA's chief marketing officer, said he hoped to make the Ocean 2 available to Virgin's prepaid customers.

Without a monthly plan, Virgin customers can pay \$20 for 200 minutes, \$30 for 400 minutes or \$50 for 1000 minutes. Boost charges 10 cents a minute.

Of course, Verizon Wireless, T-Mobile and AT&T Wireless also offer prepaid plans. They are, to put it mildly, confusing. Verizon's customers can make unlimited calls to one another, as long as they pay a \$1 fee every day they use the service.

Paying \$2 for every day you use the service allows you to make unlimited calls free, except on weekends, when it costs an additional 5 cents a minute, and your minutes expire at the end of the month if you don't use them. You get the idea.

AT&T and T-Mobile aren't much better, although AT&T, at least, allows rollover minutes. But no matter: all of the carriers' plans are more expensive than Boost's. So while the big networks and the prepaid specialists work out their plans for catching up, the crown will sit uneasily on Boost's head.

Quick Calls- If you've ever shaken your fist at the cellphone gods for not making all phone chargers alike, help is on the way. The GSM Association, an industry group, announced that manufacturers would adopt a single charger interface — more specifically, a micro-U.S.B. plug

— for all its phones. The downside? The industry has until Jan. 1, 2012, to comply. ... Here's a new brain-wasting app for the iPhone: Aim for the Brain! is a zombie-hunting game (with optional gore) for \$2. On the flip side, Brain Challenge (\$5) offers 43 tasks to test your judgment and speed and sharpen your wits. It will also track your scores over time. ... Altec Lansing will have a cool mobile gadget next month for people who like to exercise. The BackBeat 903 (\$100) is a Bluetooth headset that doubles as a set of stereo headphones. Snug headphones and a rubber stereo cable help secure the device. It works with most music phones except the iPhone, which lacks so-called A2DP Bluetooth technology. iPhone owners, and others without A2DP, pay an additional \$30 for the BackBeat 906 with an adapter.

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