

## Need A Toll Free Number

By Joel Holland

### GETTING A TOLL-FREE LINE

A toll-free number is no longer an expensive luxury for large businesses--it's now an inexpensive necessity for small businesses. For less than \$5 a month, you can set up an 800, 866, 877 or 888 number, complete with call forwarding, voice mail, extensions and more. This type of service can be a great boost to a small business's image, and can help you generate sales due to an increase in trust from potential customers.

And unlike having a landline, you won't have to go through a big carrier like AT&T or Bell Atlantic for a toll-free number; you don't even need a physical line. A plethora of small technology companies have purchased blocks of numbers that connect to a few hard-wired lines that run to the telecom companies.

It's kind of like running a parking lot. The person who owns the parking lot can have 300 cars park in his lot throughout the day, even though he only has 20 spots. With toll-free numbers, the company that provides the number might actually only own 20 phone lines, but it rents out 300 phone numbers figuring that at any given time only 20 of the lines will be in use. By carrying the costs of just 20 lines while charging 300 clients for the use of a toll-free number, carrier can keep costs down and charge lower prices to the people "renting" the toll-free numbers.

**The major selling point for these toll-free numbers? The technology add-ons that come with the service.** If you're like me, running a business from a cell phone between classes and meetings, having a landline doesn't really make sense since you'd have to either hire a secretary to man the phones or pay for voicemail. By using the technology add ons that come with the service, when a customer calls my stock footage company, they're greeted with a personalized message I've prerecorded: "Thank you for calling the Footage Firm. Please wait while we connect you with a customer service representative." A computer voice then

comes on the line and asks for the caller's name, which it records. Then, while the customer is listening to on-hold music, I receive a call on my cell phone that tells me who's on the line, and then connects me if I want to accept the call, or allows me to decline it.

If I decline the call or simply don't answer, the caller is taken off hold and hears another personalized message I've prerecorded: "Unfortunately, none of our customer service representatives are available at this time. Please leave a message, and we'll get back to you as soon as possible."

The service also allows you to program extensions that can transfer callers to multiple employees. This is great if your company is staffed with satellite employees. For example, if a buyer from the Discovery Channel were to call my company, they'd be greeted by a personalized message that might instruct them to press 1 for Joe, 2 for Lin, 3 for Sarah, 4 for sales, and 0 for an operator. Thus, pressing 1 would dial Joe's cell phone, 2 would dial Lin's, and so on.

The service I use is called Message Plus, from VoicePlus Communications. The cost, after a one-time \$15 setup fee, is currently \$4.95 a month, plus \$0.07 a minute when they connect your callers directly to you. (However, if you're like me and miss many of the calls because of class, you can simply check voicemail and call the customers back from a cell phone and avoid the connection charge.)

To research other competitors, do a Google search for "800 numbers." There are literally hundreds of providers, with a standard rate of around \$10 a month. A few other providers I found include Toll Free Live, Ring Central and GotVMail.

If you're looking for a way to enhance the image of your small business, a toll-free number is an economical way to do it.

**Joel Holland, 20, has been starting and running businesses since he was 12** and is currently the owner of the Footage Firm, as well as the host of Streaming Futures, a national teen career show dedicated to helping teens choose the right career path. Joel resides in Wellesley, Massachusetts, where he's a freshman at Babson College.