

Feedback

'Free' mobile phones are back

Following my article on cheap mobile phones (2.7 p10), good deals became very scarce and have been particularly absent recently. They have just returned. Some retailers are giving zero net cost contract deals. I have just ordered a Nokia 6030 from: <http://www.mobileshop.com/>

The contract gives 200 minutes/month cross network and 100 texts/month (both doubled for the first three months). This is on a 12-month contract with net cost over the first 12 months of zero. As ever, good record-keeping will be required to ensure that the insurance is cancelled at the right time, that the cashbacks are claimed at the right time and that the contract is cancelled at the right time.

Which? for December 2005 rates the Nokia 3060 a 'Best Buy' basic phone.

Onestopphoneshop.co.uk have a Siemens C72 on Orange with less airtime that is also at zero net cost over 12 months. The C72 has a camera, which the Nokia 6030 does not. Not having a camera on your phone can be essential in some security conscious workplaces.

My guess is that the retailers have not sold enough to meet their November quotas and hence are using these offers to increase sales. If this guess is correct, the deals will disappear at the end of November or earlier if they shift enough units.

It's good to talk - and even better if it costs nothing!

Philip Ingram

Cutting Comms (etc) Cost

Thanks for alerting me to Call18866; it has made a big difference to our phone bills!

There is another site (<http://www.moneysavingexpert.com/callchecker/>) which mentions 18866 and 1899, but it also provides info about international calls, some at incredibly cheap rates, e.g. 1p/minute to Turkey and Jamaica, 3p/min to Iran. (These are just examples which we have used.) The quality to Jamaica was not that good, but with the other two it was fine.

The site gives a list of providers to each country, including One Tel and BT, both at the expensive end, but included for comparison. The cheapest is often, but not always, one called Dialwise, for which no set-up is needed: you just dial a longish number to reach them, then dial the number you want.

The site has other money-saving aspects as well, which I have not yet tried, including gas and electricity providers.

Christian Puritz

Route-finding

Finding a route from A to B by road: I found that the AA website (<http://www.theaa.com>) had the edge over the others mentioned in a recent article (one was multimap, can't recall the other). The reason I preferred it was that, where it told you to turn into another road, as well as giving the local name of the road and its letter and number (e.g. A272), it also gave the place name where the road was heading for. That bit of info makes such a difference when you are trying to tell whether this is where you should be turning off.

Christian Puritz

Plastic bags

Lastly, some years ago a girl on the checkout at Iceland showed me a neat way to tie a supermarket plastic bag. Describing it is not as easy as demonstrating, but I'll try.

Imagine you are standing facing north, with the bag held in front of you, each handle resting on the back of a hand. With your right hand reach for the northern part of the left handle, and with your left hand reach for the southern part of the right handle. Then pull your hands apart, which begins to tie the handles together.

The second stage is just a repeat of the same process: put your hands back through the loops, and the right hand again reaches for the northern part of the handle now resting on the left hand, and the left hand reaches for the southern part of the handle now resting on the right hand,

This is better than tying a conventional knot; it is secure but easily undone when you want to open the bag.

Christian Puritz

Techno-Tips

Whose digital camera? – If you have a digital still or video camera, it could be worth making a close-up photo of your name and address, either written by hand or on a sticker, to say “If found please return to...”

I have done this, given it a sensible name, ‘OwnerData’, and protected the file so as not to accidentally erase it. There are plenty of honest people about who might find your camera when you leave it somewhere!

Christopher Jarman

Techno-Snips

Scotland moves closer to broadband capacity

Some 51,000 households in remote Scottish communities now have access to broadband, putting Scotland's availability on a par with the rest of the UK. A total of 99.8 per cent of the country now has access to broadband, following a £16.5m project led by the Scottish Executive, which has been working in partnership with BT.

The project is part of the Broadband for Scotland strategy which began in 2001, says Zahid Deen, head of the Executive's telecoms policy unit. ‘At that time only 43 per cent of Scotland had access to these kinds of services, 20 per cent behind the rest of the UK. We are now on a par with the rest of the country, with every community having access to broadband services,’ he said.

The project involved installing ADSL in a third of Scotland's telephone exchanges, and it is the largest project to provide broadband to rural areas carried out in the UK. ‘Because of how ADSL works, there will still be a few people outside the enabled communities who will not be able to get broadband,’ said Deen. ‘But that is an issue with the technology rather than the coverage of the project,’ he added.

(Computing 11 Jan 2006)

<http://www.computing.co.uk/2148435>

Joint venture to speed up online payments

Payment provider Voca and cash machine network operator Link have been awarded a contract to build and manage a central infrastructure to allow faster online payments in the UK by 2007.

The project will ensure that internet and telephone banking payments are completed the same day, rather than the three days it currently takes. 'Our new system will enable customers to use the internet or phone to make a payment that will reach the recipient's bank account within a few hours,' said Apacs chief executive Paul Smee.

Internet, phone and standing order payments account for just seven per cent of automated payment volumes today, but are rapidly replacing cheques as the most popular form of payment.

The industry has been under pressure for some time to speed up online payments. Chancellor Gordon Brown first raised the issue in his 1998 pre-budget report, and has since given the industry a deadline of 2008 or face new legislation. Most other major economies clear payments on the same or next day.

(Computing 04 Jan 2006)

<http://www.computing.co.uk/2148015>

Buyer beware as electronics giants launch rival DVDs

It has been described as the worst, and potentially most confusing, format war since the days of Betamax vs VHS video 30 years ago.

Over the next few months the world's leading electronics companies will unleash the long-awaited replacement for the DVD – a new type of disc that can store 23 hours' worth of films or nine hours of new high-definition video. But the rival camps are battling it out with two completely incompatible types of disc. Most of the industry is backing Blu-ray discs against the rival format, HD-DVD. While most Hollywood studios have pledged to release films on both high-definition formats, others are sticking with just one.

That means anyone wanting to upgrade their home entertainment will be forced to make a choice. Get it wrong, and they could be lumbered with an expensive video player with a very limited lifespan.

DVDs were introduced less than 10 years ago with the promise of phenomenal picture quality and room for extras such as behind-the-scenes documentaries. Today's DVD typically holds around 10GB of video, audio or software. The next generation can potentially hold up to 100GB or even more.

The new discs will be used to store films and television shows in high definition – the new television format that will soon start replacing conventional television. The first next-generation DVD players were unveiled in January at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas.

First off the starting block will be Toshiba – the main backer of HD-DVD – which is launching a \$499 player in America in March. Other machines will follow soon and could arrive in Britain before Christmas.

Sony and its partners say that they will have a rival Blu-ray player in US shops in the spring. Crucially Blu-ray will be used on the new PlayStation 3 games console. The Blu-ray camp says it has the better technology – a claim shared by the HD-DVD lobby which, although its disc capacity is less than Blu-ray's, says it has more than enough storage for consumers.

The good news is that existing DVD collections will not be made redundant. Both types of player can cope with older DVDs and CDs.

(The Daily Telegraph – 9 Jan 2006) <http://news.telegraph.co.uk/news/>

PC-free Skype calls

Skype and Linksys, a division of Cisco Systems, have developed a cordless DECT phone that enables users to make Skype calls as they move around their home or office, instead of having to sit at a computer. The first Skype-enabled product to be bundled with a Skype starter pack, the CIT 200 Internet Telephony Kit, includes a DECT handset, charger and USB base station that plugs into a computer's USB port. The handset displays the user's Skype contact list, showing which contacts are online and ready to be called. The handset also supports SkypeOut and SkypeIn, enabling users to make and receive calls to contacts with traditional landlines or mobile phones.

(BusinessINFO magazine issue 71)

<http://www.binfo.co.uk>, <http://www.skype.net>