



Public Advocate for the City of New York

**CELL PHONE SAVVY:
A GUIDE TO GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR
CURRENT AND FUTURE CELL PHONES AND
AVOIDING BEING OVERCHARGED IN NYC
NEIGHBORHOODS**

**A REPORT BY PUBLIC ADVOCATE BETSY GOTBAUM
Revised AUGUST 2005**

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Want to avoid losing a call when you drive through a tunnel on the way to work?
Want to change your home phone number to a cell phone number?
Curious about how to get the best deals on a new phone in New York City?
Would like to know where to shop to avoid lines, fees, and bad advice?

This guide from the Office of Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum will help you learn which questions to ask before you commit to a plan or adjust your service. Check out the tips below to find out how to get the most out of your cell phone service plan now and in the future.¹

Most residents of the five boroughs use cell phones and many are giving up land lines completely. New Yorkers make up a high percentage of the 3.8% of American households, or about 4.1 million people, who have given up their landline in favor of a cell phone.² This trend is on the rise.

Some callers find cell phones are cheaper than landlines. Most national plans come standard with free long distance, let you talk for free in other major metropolitan areas, and give you free calling during off-peak hours.

Cell phones fit a life spent on the move and away from home. Area codes 917, 646, and 347, primarily area codes for cell phone numbers, have become almost as identified with New York City as 212 and 718. And now you can take your number with you from one cell provider to the next or from a landline to a cell phone.

Hear Me Now: Reception and Service Areas

Having good reception in the places you will use your phone is the most important criterion you should consider when choosing or switching providers. Although New York City, and especially Manhattan, has more cell phone towers than other large cities in the country, there are many variables that determine the quality of your reception. Reception may be stronger in particular corners of your apartment, or your phone may not work in your home at all. You don't have to put up with it: find out which carriers have good reception in your area or give a phone a test drive.

Infrastructure Updates in the New York Area:

Wireless service providers each have their own infrastructures around the city, and reception quality changes. For example, Cingular's coverage and service in the New York City market recently improved when it merged with AT&T Wireless.³ Verizon Wireless has spent nearly \$1 billion improving its service in the New York area since

¹ This guide is based on information current as of 01/25/05. The best way to stay up to date with new technology and constantly changing service plans is to do research and to ask the right questions. Please also see the disclaimer at the end of this guide.

² *Cell Phone Displace Landlines in Record Numbers*. Mediamark Research Press Release 09/24/04; *Cell Phone Taxes Jar New Yorkers*, New York Sun 10/11/2004.

³ Cell Phone Reception—New York, NY. <http://www.cellreception.com/city/newyork/page2.html>. Accessed 1/31/05.

2001 and through a contract with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) controls the wireless infrastructure in the Queens Midtown and Brooklyn Battery Tunnels. Wireless service is more consistent on all carriers in the Lincoln and Holland Tunnels since each wireless carrier has its own contract with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

Advice for Commuters and Travelers: Trains and Subways Wired for Cell Phones

Verizon also serves the Amtrak/NJ Transit rail tunnel connecting Penn Station to New Jersey, as well as the Washington DC Metro, and will soon serve the San Francisco Bay Area's BART system. The MTA looked into wiring the City's subways in 2001, but abandoned the idea in September 2004 due to high costs.⁴

How to Determine Reception Quality Before You Buy:

- **Ask Around:** Ask colleagues in your office and neighbors in your building to find out which providers they use, how well their phones work, and where they don't work at all.
- **Search on the Web:** Use search terms like "cell reception," your neighborhood name, the wireless carrier, and "New York City" to find many of the sites and forums dedicated to information on reception quality. A sample of useful websites include:
 - Cellreception.com. Search by city or zip code down to the intersection.
 - Cellphoneforums.net. Search this online forum for information on phones, reception, and plans.
 - Cellguru.net. Focuses on New York and other states in New England, rating reception in cities across each state from each of the major cell phone providers including roaming information.
 - HowardForums.com. Prolific forums about all cell phone issues and questions you may have.
 - T-Mobile.com. T-Mobile has reception maps in the "coverage" area of its website that predict reception quality around your neighborhood.
- **Got Commitment Issues? Take a Phone on a Test Drive:** Each of the national carriers discussed in this guide will let you try a phone for at least 14 days before you commit to your contract.⁵ Cingular gives you 30 days. Just ask!

| |
|---|
| <p>Is it free to port my number to another carrier when my contract is over? Yes! All cell phone subscribers pay a federal tax every month to make this possible. There is no charge to bring your number with you to a new carrier when your contract ends.</p> |
|---|

⁴ Airbus: *Mobile Phones Set to Soar*. New York Post 09/16/2004.

⁵ Press Release 303-03, 10/27/03: *Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, DoITT Commissioner Gino Menchini, and Consumer Affairs Commissioner Gretchen Dykstra Announce Program to Track Cell Phone "Dead Spots" Citywide*. Check your carrier's plan for details; there may be some non-refundable costs such as the activation fee, minutes used, or a re-stocking fee.

Optimizing your Contract

It's a **big deal** that you can now **take your number from your old wireless provider or a landline** and bring it to a new wireless provider. Over **8.5 million people did it** in the first year it was possible.⁶ If you don't like your plan, or your service, you too can try another provider. Now wireless service providers are pricing service plans more competitively. Since wireless consumers can now change carriers, providers not only have to initially attract consumers but also keep them on board after their contract expires with ongoing incentives.

What's the Best Way to Sign Up for a Contract?

Signing or renewing a cell phone contract can be done as quickly and easily as shopping online for anything else. However, taking more time to window shop online, at stores or in newspapers to find the right plan with the most attractive promotions or a discounted full-featured phone can also be a rewarding experience. **Compare prices** online and in stores for plans—sometimes discounts on voicemail and other add-ons are only available online.

How Long Do I Have to Keep My Contract?

Your contract is the amount of time **you are legally bound to stay with your wireless service provider**. Most **contracts last 1 or 2 years** from the time you begin your service. Some carriers will let you sign up without a contract term—either by providing the phone yourself or by opting for a pre-paid contract—but you won't be eligible for as many discounts.

When is the Best Time to Negotiate for Deals?

Signing up for a new contract or renewing your contract is the best time to **get new perks** such as **promotional minutes**, a **discount on a sophisticated new phone**, a better deal on a plan, **more airtime**, or other loyalty discounts (if you're renewing). When renewing, it's in your interest to get the most out of the new contract and compare offerings with other carriers rather than taking the first thing your existing carrier offers you—such as a small discount off your next bill.

You may be eligible for an Employee Discount!

Wireless providers offer discounts to employees of hundreds of companies on phones, plans, and accessories. Employees of the City of New York—the City's biggest employer—for instance, qualify for big discounts on monthly access charges. City employees can sign up to get 20% off with Sprint, 20% off with Cingular, 19% off with Verizon, and 10% off with Nextel. Inquire with your company or call your wireless provider to find out if you are eligible for a corporate discount and sign up.

⁶ LNP a year later shows 8.5 million people switched carriers. Mobile Tech News 11/24/2004.

Picking a Contract Type

Jet Setters: Options for New Yorkers Who Travel

New Yorkers are frequent travelers within the tri-state area, other states, and other countries. **National plans give you the flexibility** to travel to other metropolitan areas in the country without worrying whether you are being charged additional fees to roam outside your service area. Check out the coverage map on the Internet or the carrier's brochure to see if your national plan includes Canada in its coverage area. Some Cingular and T-Mobile plans will also let you roam around the world for a fee.

Regional plans will **save you money and give you more talking time** than national plans if you never plan to use your phone **outside the tri-state area**.

Uncomplicate Your Life: How to Simplify Billing for Your Household

Family plans allow couples and families to split minutes between two or more lines as needed. Additional phone lines for your family members can be added for a small surcharge, currently around \$10 each.

Service Plans

Most New Yorkers spend \$60 or less on their monthly cell phone contract.⁷ Each carrier offers many types of service plans that are in this range. Visit a cell phone retailer, website, or an online cell phone retailer like cnet.com or amazon.com that carry plans from several providers to compare available plans. Other guides to cell phones listed in the Resources section below also compare plans of several providers. Service plans offerings are always changing and you should consult an authorized dealer about contract terms before picking one.

Test-drive your carrier. All carriers in New York City give you a trial period of at least 14 days before you are committed to your contract term. Cingular gives you 30 days.

Picking a Contract Term

1 year

Pros:

- Shorter commitment in case your phone needs repairs, a new battery, or is lost.
- You have more flexibility to shop for new plans and get discounted phones more frequently when you sign up for new service.
- You can keep your phone without a contract as long as you like after your term ends with no penalty for quitting.

Best & Worst of Early Contract Cancellation Penalties

\$150 – Sprint (**cheapest**)

\$175 – Verizon

\$200 – T-Mobile

\$200 – Nextel

\$240 – Cingular (**most expensive**)

Note: Cingular prorates early contract termination fees based on the remaining term.

⁷ According to amazon.com, best-selling phone contracts in New York, NY. Accessed on 1/27/05.

Cons:

- Activation fee and/or phone may be more expensive.
- Not eligible for some promotions that 2-year contract subscribers receive (e.g., Verizon offers a \$100 discount toward a new phone—which would extend your contract—in the 22nd month of a 2-year contract).

2 years

Pros:

- Activation fee and/or phone may be cheaper.
- Phone may be more discounted.
- Some special promotions may only be available with 2-year contracts.

Cons:

- You are more likely to spend money insuring, repairing, or replacing your old phone.
- Less frequent opportunity to buy a new phone, be eligible for new service options, discounts, or switch carriers.

Pre-Paid/No Contract (not available on all carriers)

Pros:

- You have no commitment to keep service.
- Your credit history is unimportant.
- No penalty for quitting.

Cons:

- Minutes are more expensive.
- Not eligible for most contract-based promotions (such as in-network calling, unlimited nights and weekends, etc.—check with your carrier).

NYC Cell Phone Laws

- New York State law prohibits the use of hand-held cell phones while driving on all public roads, except in the case of an emergency. Use hands-free equipment like a headset instead.
- Using your phone during performances of any kind is illegal in New York City.

How Long Do Phones Last?

Of the 98.9 million cell phones purchased in the U.S. in 2004, about **20 to 25% of phones needed some sort of repair within the first year. Cell phones now last 19 months on average**⁸—less than the length of a 2-year contract. Phone batteries usually can hold a good charge for about one year, after which a new battery can run you at least \$30. And as phones have become more complex with cameras and other features, there is a greater possibility that their internal gadgetry or moving parts (like the hinge of a flip-phone) could break.

⁸ *When Phones Go Bad: Fancier Gadgets Mean More Acute Problems.* Washington Post 10/31/2004.

Should I Buy Phone Replacement Insurance?

There are many levels of phone replacement insurance and it costs about \$4-6 per month. It's more worthwhile if your phone is very expensive. **Read the fine print:** most replacement plans have additional deductibles and do not cover loss or physical damage. Due to their costs and details, only about 10% of cell phone subscribers choose to purchase phone replacement insurance plans.⁹

What If I Lose My Phone or Want to End My Contract Before It's Up?

After the 14-day trial period when you first buy your phone, the penalties for breaking a contract begin at \$150 and may be as high as \$600, depending on where and when you bought your phone (see "where to shop" below). **You are still committed to your contract even if you break or lose your phone.** If you buy a new phone before the end of your contract, ask whether you can get a discount on the new phone for being a longtime customer. You may be able to get a consumer loyalty discount, but it will most likely extend your contract and not be as good a discount as you could get by signing up for new service.

Activating Service

When's the Best Time to Get a Good Deal on a New Phone?

Wireless carriers give new customers the deepest discounts in exchange for a new one- or two-year contract. These savings can make phones that retail for several hundred dollars free or nearly free with a new service contract. **Compare prices** online, in carrier stores, at small stores, and in advertisements in weekly newspapers like *The Village Voice*. You may also be able to find a rate plan that is cheaper than your current rate.

Can I get a free cell phone?

→ Yes, if you sign up for a new contract and have good credit. Free phones are found in almost every store, but are slightly more common online and in small authorized dealers.

→ Sometimes the free phone may factor in an in-store or mail-in rebate. Ask whether the price includes rebates and if so how long it will take for them to process. Some may take a few months.

Should I take Any Precautions About Renewing My Contract with My Existing Provider?

If you want to stay with your current provider after your contract expires, you may be able to negotiate a cheaper rate plan directly with your carrier. Providers sometimes offer their customers loyalty discounts on their plans based on their tenure with the service and whether they have multiple accounts.

Why should I Be Careful When Changing My Minutes and Features?

Take the precaution of asking the customer support staff every time you change your plan whether the change you are making will affect your contract term. Extended minutes or additional features might not be available with your current plan or may qualify as additional promotions. Taking on new promotions (such as more minutes, earlier weekends, or in-network calling) may extend your contract.

⁹ Ibid.

Picking a Phone

Selecting a phone can be both an exciting and daunting task. Phones today have been reinvented as personal digital consoles that optionally come with cameras, screens able to display video in thousands of colors, personal organizers, the ability to send and receive multimedia messages, surf the net, listen to MP3s or the radio, play videos games, download elaborate ring tones, or connect to other electronics and your computer with a cord or wirelessly.

It may be fun to entertain having all of these features on a single device in your pocket, but they are all optional as none of them affect the calling capabilities of your phone. When you pick a phone the most important criteria to consider is which carriers have the best service where you will be making calls most, and if you spend time outside the city, how your phone will work in other locations.

What to Know If You Use Your Phone Frequently Outside New York City

In areas where your provider's signal is weak, your cell phone can roam on other carriers' networks. But there may be a fee: your carrier's coverage maps are not usually detailed enough to tell you how your reception will be in a locality, but you should still consult them (available online or in a brochure) to find out whether the area you are going is covered by your rate plan or whether you might be charged for domestic roaming.

Useful for Domestic Travelers

- **Travelers to other big cities** should find that all wireless providers have good service in big cities.
- **Dual-Mode** and **Tri-Mode** phones work on both the digital network found in cities and inner suburbs, and the analog networks still remaining in outer suburban and rural areas. Other providers are building their coverage in outer areas but are still less likely to have coverage as comprehensive in outer areas as **Verizon** and **Sprint**, even when they roam.

Do you spend much time outside the city in rural areas or less-populous areas? If so, you are more likely to find better reception in those areas with a tri-band phone that works with digital and analog bands from Verizon or Sprint. All national carriers today have

expansive and increasing coverage areas, but Verizon and Sprints' networks are the most extensive outside major metropolitan areas. Still, if you can, you should ask people who live or work in those areas which providers work for them before making your decision.

Avoid Roaming Charges: You are roaming when you are outside of your provider's coverage area on your provider's coverage map and using another wireless provider's signal. Sometimes the word roam or the other provider's name will appear on your phone's screen. Roaming is billed by the minute and can be quite expensive. To avoid roaming look at your coverage map to see if areas you go are covered by your provider, or call and

Useful for International Travelers

World Phones available on **Cingular** and **T-Mobile** can operate on GSM (Global Standard for Mobile) networks worldwide.

ask. Roaming in foreign countries, sometimes including Canada, is even more expensive. Find out the roaming prices on your provider's website before using your phone abroad.

Do you want to use your phone internationally? Multi-band GSM world phones sold by Cingular and T-Mobile are compatible with extensive cell phone networks in Europe and Asia. Note that international roaming charges can be expensive. If you plan to use your phone frequently abroad, it might be cheaper to buy a prepaid cell phone when you get there.

For Users of former AT&T Wireless Phones using TDMA/AMPS technologies
Cingular supports AT&T Wireless' older TDMA (Time Division Multiple Access) digital and analog AMPS phones. The network will be phased out in the coming years in favor of GSM. Users with older phones will still be able to use them, but new customers will not be able to activate new TDMA service.

Picking a Carrier

In the last few years **cell phone minutes have become cheaper**. Today a \$40 plan can buy you up to 1000 anytime minutes. The same amount would have bought a mere fraction of that amount of time in the late 90s. **Many incentives**, like unlimited calling on nights and weekends, are now standard on most plans. The following is a list of promotions that the country's national wireless providers (Cingular, Verizon, T-Mobile, Nextel) offer today with new contracts.

Which providers do your friends and family use?

If it was included in your contract when you signed up, you can chat with others who use your carrier for as long as you want at any time of the day for free on:

- Verizon
- Nextel
- Cingular

Or for a small monthly fee on:

- T-Mobile
- Sprint

Want more off-peak hours?

T-Mobile gives you the options to begin night calling at 7pm instead of 9pm or take a 3-day weekend of unlimited calling that also includes Fridays.

Want to keep the minutes you didn't use this month for future use?

Cingular's *Rollover* plans let you save unused minutes from one month to the next.

Want to avoid big charges if you go over your minutes allowance?

Sprint's *Fair & Flexible* plans charge you \$5 for every block of 100 minutes you use over your plan's quota of anytime minutes. That means paying as little as 5¢ per minute if you go over, when other plans charge as much as 40¢ per minute.

How are subscribers affected when wireless providers merge?

Last year Cingular bought AT&T Wireless, and this year Sprint will merge with Nextel. When mergers occur, the terms of your existing contract stay the same, but you may not receive newer benefits and promotions (such as Cingular's Rollover minutes or free in-network calling) until you sign a new contract with the provider.

Can I bring my number to a new carrier?

All cell phone users now pay a tax to be able to "port" their number to other providers. This means that when you switch providers, you can bring your old number with you for free. Porting your wireless number to another provider takes only a few minutes or hours, while porting a number between landline and wireless networks may take a few days. To make sure your number is portable, inquire with the wireless service provider you want to switch to. Only cancel the old account after the number has been successfully ported.

If you think you're paying a lot in taxes and fees, it's because you are.

New Yorkers pay among the highest taxes on their cell phone service in the country. The taxes on a \$40 or \$50 monthly plan amount to approximately an additional 20% in tax, which itself is composed roughly in thirds of City, State, and Federal taxes.

Text, E-Mail and Multimedia

Phones Do A Lot More Today Than Just Let You Talk.

You can surf the web, customize your ring tone, write and receive text messages, or even multimedia messages with pictures if your phone has a camera.

Text Messaging Keeps You Informed

Text messages let you send quick messages to other cell phone users when you can't talk because you're in a meeting or a noisy place. Texting has also become very popular among teenagers for sending quick notes (parents beware!).

- **Banks** can remind you when to pay your bills; **Airlines can tell you** what gate your flight leaves from or if it has been delayed; **E-mail providers can alert you** when you have new email.
- Free services such as *What's Up New York* (whatsupnyc.com) and *TxtMob* (txtmob.com) will even send you up-to-the-minute information about **sales, parties, art-gallery openings**, and other events around town.

Text messages cost, like all other additional services. The cheapest way to text is to buy a package with your monthly bill for an extra few dollars. Check the rates at your carrier. Otherwise most carriers let you send them for 5 or 10¢ each, and receive them for free or up to 2¢ (Verizon).

You can circumvent text-message-*sending* fees by emailing your friends' cell phones from your computer if you know their provider.¹⁰ The address is their 10digitnumber@

- mobile.mycingular.com
- messaging.sprintpcs.com
- messaging.nextel.com
- mmode.com (former AT&T phones)
- tmomail.net (T-Mobile)
- vtext.com (Verizon)

Some carriers also let you customize your phone's email address. Note that text messages must be **less than 160 characters** and not all cell phones are set up to receive them.

What's the Best Kind of Store for Cell Phone Shopping: Corporate Provider Stores or Authorized Cell Phone Retailers?

- Wireless providers' corporate stores have standard prices and offerings and may be the most direct way to deal with your new or existing provider.
- Authorized dealers frequently offer better deals on phones or carry a wider variety of phones.

BlackBerry and Smart phones

let you send and receive full-length emails, as you would on a computer. Smart phones such as Treos are wireless personal digital assistants (PDAs) that combine many digital applications into your phone that are useful for a busy New Yorker. Services include a scheduler, a full keyboard for email and large screen for email

and using the net, and sometimes cameras. Extra service capabilities come with service surcharges in addition to the cost of a normal plan. Check with your provider for the exact charges and to find out which models of smart phones will work on its network.

What's Next: Broadband Everywhere.

When providers activate their third generation ("3G") networks throughout the five boroughs, beginning with Verizon in February 2005, and other networks within the next year, you will be able to use cell phone networks to do much more. If you have a laptop you will be able to buy a PC Card from your carrier that will give you a broadband

Are Prices at Authorized Cell Phone Retailers the Same?

- No. There is great variance in phone prices, phone selection, rebates, and additional cancellation fees.
- To compensate for lower phone prices, many dealers will have you sign a contract with the store that binds you to additional cancellation fees (added on to the amount you pay the wireless provider) should you cancel service early.

internet connection wherever you are in the City that operates at 5 times the speed of a computer modem. Future phones will be able to show TV and video programming. Current data networks, such as Cingular's EDGE network, are already deployed nationally and run around twice as fast as a computer modem.

¹⁰ See the complete international list of provider email access addresses: <http://www.notepage.net/sntp.htm>

Where to Shop

There seem to be more places to buy a cell phone than there are to get a coffee. In 2003, cell phone retailers were among the three most common types of new businesses opening in Manhattan.¹¹ Small cell phone stores generally advertise in free weeklies like the *Village Voice*, while wireless service providers advertise in large daily newspapers like the *New York Post* and the *New York Times*.

Small Authorized Cell Phone Stores

For: New Contract Sign-Up

Pros: Big discounts on expensive phones; easier to get a 1 year contract; store staff is knowledgeable and sells plans from multiple carriers; small stores are among the first to carry the newest phones when they come out.

Cons: Early contract termination penalties are highest (up to \$600); low advertised phone prices take rebates into account so initial purchase price may be high; prices for the same phone may vary across neighborhoods or across the street; phones may not be covered by warranties.

We sent researchers out to authorized dealers in 10 New York City neighborhoods to compare cancellation penalties and find out which providers the stores recommended (Appendix A).

- If you don't know which wireless carrier you want before you shop, you will most likely be sold a T-Mobile or Cingular plan if you shop at a NYC authorized dealer. T-Mobile was recommended to our researchers most frequently (67% of the time), and Cingular was recommended 29% of the time.
- We found that not all stores make you sign a contract that binds you to pay additional cancellation fees to the store if you cancel early, but 28 out of the 55 we visited do. Additional penalties run from \$50 to \$400 and last from 4 months to the length of your contract.
- Dealers are not forthcoming about telling you their cancellation terms and additional fees. It's your right to know the terms of your contract and know all the prices of buying a new contract – so make sure you ask.

| Additional Early Cancellation Fees at NYC Authorized Cell Phone Dealers | | |
|--|------------------|------------------------|
| <u>Neighborhood</u> | <u>Fee Range</u> | <u>Most Common Fee</u> |
| Chinatown | \$200-400 | \$300 |
| Upper East Side | \$0-300 | \$0, \$300 |
| Corona | \$0-300 | \$0, \$300 |
| Midtown/Hell's Kitchen | \$70-300 | \$200 |
| Jackson Heights | \$0-300 | \$200 |
| Jamaica | \$0-300 | \$0 |
| Washington Heights | \$0-300 | \$0 |
| Downtown Brooklyn | \$0-200 | \$0 |
| The Hub/South Bronx | \$0 | \$0 |
| East New York | \$0 | \$0 |

¹¹ *Commercial Real Estate: Manhattan: Small Stores Lead the Demand in Retailing*. New York Times 11/19/03; *Retail Stores Ring up More Vacancies*. Crain's New York Business 05/12/2003.

Looking for the World's Most Sophisticated Phones?

- Head to Chinatown: you can get phones that have not yet been released in corporate stores or may never be released in the United States.

Tips for Non-English Speakers:

- In ethnic neighborhoods, you can find sales people who speak your language and phones programmed in non-standard languages.

Tips to Remember When Shopping:

- **Compare prices at several stores:** our researchers were quoted a broad range of prices for the same phone by authorized cell phone dealers across the street from each other. Pick at least 3 stores in which to compare phone prices.
- Your **credit rating** will determine phone prices, as well as eligibility for discounts and rebates. If your credit rating is low, you may want to consider a prepaid phone. For a contract, stores may charge you extra for a collateral deposit. Sprint's deposits tend to be lower than competing carriers.

- Make sure to ask about manufacturer **warranties**. Although you can buy

Wireless Provider Stores vs. Websites:

Providers' websites frequently offer exclusive instant online rebates. Closely inspect plan terms: some providers consider voicemail and Caller ID to be extras, but sometimes they are available for free online.

In-Store Advantage: Some carrier websites make it difficult to figure out how to sign up for a 1-year contract. If you want a 1-year contract, you'll probably find it's easier to get exactly what you want at a store.

Great Places to Buy Online

Amazon: Extensive user reviews about phones, carriers, accessories, Very low prices, big instant rebates (sometimes up to \$50 more than other online retailers) that give you money back when you purchase phones. Note that rebates require you to be active on your account for 6 months.

CNet: Professional and consumer reviews. The site lets you easily compare phone prices among competing retailers. Follow the "where to buy" link to see product availability and price (with contract).

LetsTalk.com: Comprehensive site with Cingular, Verizon, T-Mobile, and Nextel. Low prices are a combination of online and carrier mail-in rebates.

equipment replacement insurance for a few dollars each month, it is possible that some authorized retailers in NYC sell refurbished phones. Take extra precaution and make sure you are getting a new phone.

Wireless service provider stores
(Cingular, T-Mobile, Verizon, Nextel, Sprint PCS)

For: New Contract Sign-Up; Existing Subscribers Extending or Changing Services

Pros: Consumers can try out phones on display with or without the aid of a salesperson; There are many sales associates around to answer questions

who are knowledgeable about the details of the providers' plans; Lowest possible penalty price for canceling contract (\$150-240 depending on the carrier).

Cons: It can be difficult to buy a 1-year contract.

Wireless service provider websites

For: New Contract Sign-Up; Existing Subscribers Extending Services

Pros: Some phones are more discounted online than in company stores; some phones are offered online that are not available in stores at all; Some contracts are discounted online and that are otherwise not available at a discount anywhere else including company stores or over the phone.

Cons: No sales associate to walk you through your purchase or the fine print; can be hard to find a 1-year contract.

Authorized Online Retailers (such as amazon.com, buy.com, letstalk.com)

For: New Contract Sign-Up

Pros: Big Discounts on expensive phones; easier to get a 1 year contract; among the first to carry the newest phones when they come out; you can buy and compare offerings from multiple carriers; online reviews and recommendations from users of phones and contracts from New York and around the country.

Cons: Low advertised phone prices take rebates into account so initial purchase price may be high; No sales associate to walk you through your purchase or the fine print.

Electronics Retailers (such as Circuit City, RadioShack)

For: New Contract Sign-Up

Pros: Ability to shop at big retailers that you trust; locations are common and convenient

Cons: As in big stores that sell many other unrelated items, sales associates may not be as familiar with all the details of the plans as sales associates in wireless service provider stores.

Wireless provider by phone

For: Existing Subscribers Extending Services

Pros: Redeem offers directly from your carrier to renew your contract; you may be able to negotiate for promotions or a lower rate.

Cons: Hard to compare with options available from other carriers.

Getting Rid of Your Old Phone

Most people don't know what to do with their old cell phone when they get a new one.

Disposing of your phone correctly is very important and very easy. Cell phones and their batteries contain persistent toxins (including antimony, arsenic, beryllium, cadmium, copper, lead, nickel, and zinc) that can be harmful when released in small amounts, which makes it important to keep them out of incinerators and landfills.¹² You can donate your phone to one of the local nonprofits listed in Appendix B, send it to a national recycling nonprofit (listed below) who will donate the proceeds to major charities, or drop it by any Staples store in New York City.

The following is a sampling of websites that provide information on how to donate your old cell phone to national or local non-profits:

- RecyclingDonation.com. Benefits: United Way, the American Heart Association, and the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.
- CharitableRecycling.com. Phones are donated to abused adults and children in shelters so they may have access to 911. Shipping is free.
- RecycleWirelessPhones.com. Every major wireless carrier is a sponsor of *Wireless: The New Recyclable*, a program to let you recycle your phone in their corporate phone stores. If your phone cannot be refurbished (for resale), its base materials will be recycled.
- RecycleCellPhones.com will show your charitable organization how to raise money by setting up cell phone recycling in your community.

To search for cell phone disposal/donation locations by zip code, visit the Cell Phone and Computer Recycling page on Earth 911's New York website (NewYork.earth911.org).

Filing Complaints

311 and the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs monitor dead spots in New York City cell coverage. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is responsible for ensuring that wireless service providers abide by industry regulations. All major wireless providers discussed in this report are signatories of the Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association (CTIA) *Consumer Code for Wireless Service*. Among its guarantees are a 14-day trial period, disclosure of rates and terms of service at point of sale, accuracy in advertising, giving consumers the right to terminate service if the carrier changes existing terms of service, and promptly responding to complaints from government agencies.¹³ If you have a complaint about coverage in the five boroughs or about a specific wireless provider call the Public Advocate's Office at (212) 669-7250 or the City of New York at 311.

¹² *Waste in the Wireless World: Toxicity of Cell Phone Waste*. INFORM, Inc. 11/2003.

¹³ CTIA: *Consumer Code for Wireless Service*, and Press Release 303-03, 10/27/03: *Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, DoITT Commissioner Gino Menchini, and Consumer Affairs Commissioner Gretchen Dykstra Announce Program to Track Cell Phone "Dead Spots" Citywide*.

Other Resources and National Guides to Cell phones

New York City and State Resources

“Dead spots” in New York City reception collected from 311 (October 2004)

http://www.nyc.gov/html/doitt/html/consumer/consumer_cell.shtml

The Need for Wireless Telephone Consumer Protections: New York (June 2004)

http://research.aarp.org/consume/ny_wireless.html

National Guides

CNet Cell Phone Reviews—includes professional and user reviews

<http://reviews.cnet.com/>

Consumer Reports: February issue (annually)

<http://www.consumerreports.org/>

Washington Post’s Annual Guide to Wireless Phone Service (October 2004)

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/technology/interactives/cellguide04/front.htm>

Industry and Government Regulation

CTIA Consumer Code for Wireless Service

http://www.ctia.org/wireless_consumers/consumer_code/

Filing a Complaint with the FCC

<http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/complaints.html>

Political Issues and Consumer Trends in the Wireless Industry

MyWireless: America’s Wireless Voice

<http://www.mywireless.org/>

Public Advocate for the City of New York Disclaimer:

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Appendix A: Early Cancellation Penalties at NYC Authorized Cell Phone Dealers

| Store | Address | Neighborhood | Rec'd Carrier | Carrier Early Termination Penalty | Additional Store Early Termination Penalty | Net Early Termination Penalty |
|---------------------------|----------------|---------------------|----------------------|--|---|--------------------------------------|
| Horizon Wireless | 2855 3Av | South Bronx | T Mobile | 240 | 0 | 240 |
| Cellular-Nextel, etc. | 148th & 3Av | South Bronx | Cingular | 240 | 0 | 240 |
| Span Am Wireless | 398 E 148 | South Bronx | Cingular | 240 | 0 | 240 |
| O. R. Communications | 2883 3Av | South Bronx | T Mobile | 200 | 0 | 200 |
| Most Wanted Wireless | 2839 3Av | South Bronx | Cingular | 240 | 0 | 240 |
| Wen Zhou Eastern Wireless | 44 Bowery | Chinatown | T Mobile | 200 | 400 | 600 |
| Hydra | 109 Lafayette | Chinatown | Cingular | 240 | 350 | 590 |
| Wireless Mall | 9 Division St | Chinatown | T Mobile | 200 | 300 | 500 |
| Rong Ding | 170 Canal St | Chinatown | T Mobile | 200 | 300 | 500 |
| Okashi Land Techno Cell | 163 Hester St | Chinatown | T Mobile | 200 | 300 | 500 |
| Ha Xong | 145 Canal St | Chinatown | T Mobile | 200 | 200 | 400 |

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|------------------|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------|--|---|--------------------------------------|
| La Bamba | Junction Blvd | Corona | T Mobile | 200 | 300 | 500 |
| Bahia | 96-09 Roosevelt Av | Corona | T Mobile | 200 | 300 | 500 |
| Orange Wireless | 93-09 Roosevelt Av | Corona | T Mobile | 200 | 300 | 500 |
| Phone Spot | 3779 Junction Blvd | Corona | T Mobile | 200 | 0 (if you return the phone) | 200 |
| Wireless 7 | 89-02 Roosevelt Av | Corona | Cingular | 240 | 0 | 240 |
| ComCell Mobile | 84-18 Roosevelt Av | Corona | Sprint | 150 | 0 | 150 |
| Mercury | 398 Fulton Mall | Downtown Brooklyn | T Mobile | 200 | 200 | 400 |
| Cellular Tropics | 547 Fulton Mall | Downtown Brooklyn | T Mobile | 200 | 100 | 300 |
| Fulton Wireless | 472 Fulton Mall | Downtown Brooklyn | Sprint | 150 | 0 | 150 |
| Stop Cell | 400 Fulton Mall | Downtown Brooklyn | T Mobile | 200 | 0 | 200 |
| Beep 2000 | 435 Fulton Mall | Downtown Brooklyn | T Mobile | 200 | 0 | 200 |

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|----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|--|---|--------------------------------------|
| Cellular Blast | 395 Jay St | Downtown Brooklyn | T Mobile | 200 | 0 | 200 |
| Intellifact Services | 2667 Pitkin Av | East New York | Cingular | 240 | 0 | 240 |
| Latino Records | 1082 Liberty Av | East New York | T Mobile | 200 | 0 | 200 |
| Krishna Bazaar | 1104 Liberty Av | East New York | T Mobile | 200 | 0 | 200 |
| Express Wireless PCS | 495 Grant Av | East New York | T Mobile | 200 | 0 | 200 |
| BHS Communications | 1150 Liberty Av | East New York | T Mobile | 200 | 0 | 200 |
| Fulton Family Corp | 3333 Fulton St | East New York | T Mobile | 200 | 0 | 200 |
| Sky Wireless of NY | 74-13A Roosevelt Av | Jackson Heights | Cingular | 200 | 300 | 500 |
| Y & L Variety | 75-06 Roosevelt Av | Jackson Heights | Cingular | 240 | \$200 | 440 |
| PC Wireless Inc | 76-09 Roosevelt Av | Jackson Heights | T Mobile | 200 | \$200 (\$0 if you return the phone) | 200 |
| Z-Wireless | Roosevelt Av bet 80-81 Sts | Jackson Heights | Cingular | 200 | 0 | 200 |

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|---------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|--|---|--------------------------------------|
| Sun Gift Wireless | 76-10 Roosevelt Av | Jackson Heights | T Mobile | 200 | 0 | 200 |
| Cellular Services | 89-04 Sutphin Blvd | Jamaica | T Mobile | 200 | 300 | 500 |
| Reliable Wireless | 90-52 Sutphin Blvd | Jamaica | Cingular | 240 | 150 | 390 |
| Big Value | 166-37 Jamaica Av | Jamaica | T Mobile | 200 | 100 | 300 |
| NY Tele World Connection | 148-03A Hillside Av | Jamaica | T Mobile | 200 | 75 | 275 |
| No Name (has Vigo sign) | Sutphin bet. 88Av + Hillside | Jamaica | T Mobile | 200 | 0 | 200 |
| Skylight | 168-47 Hillside Av | Jamaica | T Mobile | 200 | 0 | 200 |
| J&D Telecom, Inc. | 850 9Av | Midtown-West | Cingular | 200 | 300 | 500 |
| 8th Ave. Gift Store | 618 8Av | Midtown-West | Cingular | 200 | 200 | 400 |
| City Sound Electronic Inc | 575 8Av | Midtown-West | Cingular | 200 | 200 | 400 |
| Ustronics Com Inc | 580 8 Av | Midtown-West | Cingular | 200 | 200 | 400 |

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|------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------|-----------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| 9th Ave Cellular | 709 9Av | Midtown-West | Cingular | 200 | 70-100 | 200 |
| All Ages Wireless | 1Av bet 70-71 Sts | Upper East | T Mobile | 200 | 300 | 500 |
| R.V. Wireless | 1292 1Av | Upper East | T Mobile | 200 | 0 | 200 |
| Wireless Center | 1392 2Av | Upper East | T Mobile | 200 | 250 | 450 |
| Wireless Time | 1433 1Av | Upper East | T Mobile | 200 | 300 | 500 |
| Home Attractions | 1400 2Av | Upper East | Cingular | 240 | 0 | 240 |
| No Name | 4229 Broadway | Washington Heights | T Mobile | 200 | 300 | 500 |
| Broadway Plaza Express | 4179 Broadway | Washington Heights | T Mobile | 175 | 250 | 425 |
| Unitech Wireless | 4153 Broadway | Washington Heights | T Mobile | 200 | 50 | 250 |
| Uno Communications | 716 W 181St | Washington Heights | T Mobile | 200 | 0 | 200 |
| Uno Communications | 709 W 181St | Washington Heights | T Mobile | 200 | 0 | 200 |

Appendix B: Phone Recycling Locations for Charitable Donation in New York City

Manhattan

Avon Foundation

(Women's Empowerment)
Contact: Pamela Harrington
1345 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10105
(212) 282-5663

Strycker's Bay Neighborhood Council

(Affordable Housing)
Contact: Herb Rosenbloom
66 West 94th Street
New York, NY 10025

US Fund for UNICEF

(UN Children's Fund)
Contact: Kelley Perry
333 East 38th Street
New York, NY 10016
(203) 790-9218

Lower East Side Ecology Center

c/o Kinko's
250 East Houston Street
New York, NY 10002

INFORM, Inc.

(Environmental Research)
Contact: Eve Martinez
120 Wall Street
New York, NY 10005
(212) 361-2400, ext. 229

Brooklyn

Recycle A Bicycle

(Youth Job Training Program)
Contact: Karen Overton
55 Washington Street
Brooklyn, NY 11201
(718) 858-2972
www.recycleabicycle.org

Consumer Information & Dispute Resolution, Inc.

(Disabled & those living with
Catastrophic Illnesses)
Contact: Steven Lean
32 Court Street, #1401
Brooklyn, NY 11201
(718) 222-2437

Bronx

Soft-Word, Inc.

(Family Empowerment)
941 East 219th Street
Bronx, NY 10469
(718) 325-7936