

TIMES ONLINE

By Ali Hussain

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Mobile that beats the phone giants

One network is introducing cheap calls via the internet to landlines

MOBILE firms may be forced to let customers make internet calls from their handsets, giving them access to cheap or even free calls anywhere in the world, the European Commission said last week.

The telecoms commissioner, Viviane Reding, who last week announced plans to further reduce mobile “roaming” rates — charged for making and receiving calls in Europe — said: “Internet telephony is for many citizens the only cost-effective way to stay in touch. I would of course encourage this technology, but for the time being [the operators] seem to be a little reluctant.”

However, 3 will bring the prospect a step closer this week by allowing contract users to make Skype calls to networks and landlines outside Britain.

Mobile operators have resisted internet calling packages such as Skype because they let customers bypass mobile networks and their high charges.

A standard call to an American landline using a T-Mobile phone can cost 90p a minute on pay-as-you-go and 70p a minute for contract customers. A call using Skype, one of the most popular internet telephony providers, costs 1.4p a minute to a landline. A call to another Skype user is free.

T-Mobile allows internet calls, known as Voip, through a subscription to its Web'n' Walk Max package, which costs an extra £22.50 a month.

The reluctance of operators to adopt Voip means that most people who use it tend to make calls on their PCs with a microphone and headset.

From October, however, 3 will offer a contract allowing users to make “Skype out” calls to another network or landline using Skype credits. 3 already offers a Skypephone that accesses Voip at the touch of a button. However, until now customers could only make Skype calls to other Skype users.

The new Skypephone will be free on a contract costing at least £15 a month, or £69.99 for pay as you go. The contract comes with 300 minutes of calls on the network.

You can make 4,000 minutes of Skype calls a month although you have to sign up to a calling package.

The cheapest is Unlimited Country, costing £2.24 a month on top of a monthly fee. This allows you to call landlines in one of 20 European countries, including France and Spain.

The Unlimited Europe package, costs £3.39 a month, and allows you to call any of the 20 European countries with Skype. Both these versions only allow Skype calls to landlines.

The Unlimited World package costs £7.99 a month and allows users to call the European countries as well as the US, Canada, China, Hong Kong and Singapore using Skype. This version allows calls to mobiles.

You cannot use Skype for calls to or within the UK, you must use the bundled free minutes instead. When roaming, you pay about 25p a minute.

Apple iPhone customers, who use the O2 network, have access to Voip through Truphone, a rival to Skype.

Unlike the 3 deal, however, calls are made via a wi-fi rather than a 3G network, so you need to be near a “hotspot” in cafés, bars, hotels and stations.

The new Google phone, known as G1, is expected to go on sale in the US next month and Britain by November. The handset is expected to be free on a £40-a-month contract and the package will include a 3GB download limit. It is unlikely to be made available on pay as you go, according to T-Mobile.

T-Mobile said Voip would be available on the G1 if someone created a software program for it, although there were no plans to change the current fee structure, so customers might have to pay as much as £62.50 a month for the privilege — £40 for the contract and £22.50 for Web'n'Walk.

Others such as Lycamobile, which uses the Orange network, offer cheap international calls — as little as 4p a minute to landlines in most cases. Mobile rates are higher at about 13p-15p a minute. Calls to other Lycamobile customers are free after a 15p connection charge.

How to make web calls

3: Sign up to a 3 contract costing £15 a month and pay at least £2.24 for Skype. It comes with a Skypephone so you can make internet calls at the touch of a button. You can access Skype anywhere there is a mobile signal.

Apple iPhone: Sign up to an Apple iPhone through O2 for at least £30 a month. Download Truphone software from apple.com/iphone/appstore. You will need access to wi-fi.

Google: No Voip software yet. As it uses T-Mobile's network, you pay £22.50 a month on top for Web'n'Walk. Extra data charges apply, a maximum of £1 a day in the UK.



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Minette Martin

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From The Sunday Times

September 27, 2008

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