

Going Unplugged? Know the Facts before you take the leap...

I was already done with the February column when I was summoned back to reality by recent news events in the Buffalo metro area. As such, the initial column has been put hold for a month so that the space can be used to address a more current and pressing issue which needs regular revisiting. Over the Christmas holidays, 3 people died in a house fire in Cheektowaga. It is almost certain that had they called 911 from a traditional landline phone instead of a cell phone, the fire department could have been at the home much sooner than the 28 minutes it took to notify proper authorities.

It's impossible to know whether that time difference would have saved their lives, but as people migrate away from traditional landline phones (and rarely consider the need for calling 911 when making those decisions) to more convenient, but otherwise problematic wireless devices, as well as VoIP telephone systems (read: Vonage, among many others), it's essential that they understand two things: 1) In an emergency, the location information that is provided by design to a landline phone may not be available to the E911 call center that dispatches the first responder ; and 2) while it's possible that in an emergency, 911 can be dialed, it's also possible the person doing the dialing is unable to speak, thus preventing the call center agent from learning the precise location—and/or nature--of the emergency. In the recent Buffalo case, all that the call center agent heard was screaming. The system didn't fail...it just has limitations which were proven in late December with tragic consequences.

On the corporate side, AT&T recently suggested in a response to the FCC that it was time to transition away from plain old telephone service (affectionately known as "POTS" or copper-based) in favor of a phone network that is completely based upon internet telephony. In fact, according to *Network World*, AT&T informed the FCC that "the death of landlines is a matter of when and not if." It further suggested that the FCC establish a date certain by which such existing networks be unplugged.

This request seems so unreasonable as to make experts wonder if this salvo was merely the opening round in AT&T's attempt to secure some other concession from the FCC on something much less fundamental. While AT&T is correct in its assertion that people are migrating away from traditional wireline phones at a decent pace, the fact remains that while the technology supporting traditional POTS lines and other service may be Mesozoic to some, is a lifeline to others.

In rural communities and remote areas, wireless service is spotty at best. In addition, the likelihood of a local carrier investing in equipment necessary to bring such areas up to speed has been unlikely until major telecommunications investment made possible by stimulus money. However, even for those communities who have been selected to receive stimulus funding, actual implementation is still months, if not years, away.

On a more basic level, traditional corded wireline phones are able to access dialtone even in the event of a power failure. As anyone who tried to use a cordless phone several days into the October Surprise storm found out, once the battery's out of juice, the phone is useful only as a paperweight. In a power failure situation, not only will a cordless or cell phone not work once it's out of

power, but internet-based telephones (VoIP or other IP phones) will also cease to function because if there's no power to the computer, there's no power to the phone. Some IP customers maintain significant battery backup capacity.

Secondly, toll free numbers are only toll free if you're not being billed per minute of usage as most people are on wireless phones. Save your minutes—call toll free numbers from landlines. It's just cheaper.

Thirdly, from an enterprise perspective (as has been mentioned previously in this space), fax quality on an IP phone network is simply not either reliable or accurate enough to abandon POTS either. My usual recommendation to clients is that they keep a fax machine with a phone attached at a POTS line. This solves two problems—the fax works reliably, and there's a ready line for dialing 911 if the need arises.

One network insider recently posted what he believes is the motivation behind AT&T's comments—namely a shift in liability away from the carrier. According to David Josephson, a California-based microphone manufacturer and low power radio aficionado, "it's reasonable to require the customer to provide a standard telephone instrument -- spares are cheap and easily fixed -- but now we are asked to provide power and to replace the backup battery. Is that OK? Are we going back to farmers' lines with local dry cell batteries?"

He continued, "Yes, remote terminals (whether fiber or copper) with just eight hours of backup are a weak link, but the wireline carriers have typically been able to respond with a small generator when a power outage exceeds battery capacity, just as a central office generator is expected to take over if downtown is dark."

Most importantly, however, Mr. Josephson commented that "the issue is not

which technology is in use, the issue is whether the carrier is permitted to dump the responsibility for outages on the subscriber.” Stay tuned.

Consumers don't make phone purchase decisions based on the unlikely occurrence that they might need to call E911. But, in fact, it's the one factor that cannot be underestimated. Landlines are available for a minimal amount, and until wireless technology, both resident in individual devices and in the appropriate governmental entity's supporting configuration are prepared to send and receive site-specific information (technically called Automatic Number Identification (ANI) and Automatic Location Information (ALI), it's a consideration that needs to be weighed much more heavily than it has been. We all buy insurance (auto, home, health, life) and a POTS line is simply insurance. You hope you don't have to use it, but are glad it's there when you need it.