

I spent the 1990s and 2000s crawling through phone rooms in San Jose, tracing cable in dusty basements in Los Angeles, and arguing with carrier reps from San Diego to Sacramento. If you have ever stared at an old 66 block labeled "PacBell" or seen a faded "GTE" tag on a demarc, you know the feeling: the infrastructure is still there, but the company that built it has vanished into a merger or a rebrand.

People ask me versions of the same questions all the time. What was the old phone company called? What were the telephone companies in the 1980s? What phone companies no longer exist? And underneath it all, a more practical concern: which companies still offer a landline, will landlines be phased out, and what is the cheapest landline phone service without internet for a parent or grandparent who just wants a dial tone?

Let us walk through that past and present, with some California flavor and a business-phone perspective.

When "the phone company" was singular

For a big part of the 20th century, if you asked an American "Who is the #1 phone company?", the answer was simple: AT&T, often just called "the phone company."

AT&T's Bell System controlled local phone service in most of the country, long distance, equipment, research, and a lot of what we would now call the internet's precursors. In California, the name you saw on the bill was "Pacific Telephone & Telegraph," later "Pacific Bell," but it was all part of the same Bell System.

When people talk about what was the old phone company called in the 80s, for much of the country they mean Ma Bell and her regional companies. That changed on January 1, 1984, with the Bell System breakup.

The 1980s landscape: from one giant to many names

After AT&T was forced to divest its local operations, the U.S. Was carved into seven Regional Bell Operating Companies, usually called the "Baby Bells." In California that meant Pacific Bell under the holding company Pacific Telesis. Nationally you saw names like Bell Atlantic, NYNEX, Southwestern Bell, and US West.

Alongside the Bells, there were big independents: GTE, Contel, and hundreds of tiny rural telcos. Long-distance competition introduced names that used to be on every payphone sticker: AT&T Long Distance, MCI, Sprint.

If your memory of the 1980s includes rotary phones, 1+ long distance codes, and busy signals, you were served by one of those carriers. Many of them no longer exist in any recognizable form.

Phone companies that no longer exist (at least not by name)

When people ask what phone companies are out of business, they often mean "out of sight." The truth is, most did not go bankrupt, they were acquired, merged, or rebranded into today's major telecommunications companies.

Here are some of the most common "Where did they go?" names I still see etched into California buildings and service labels:

- Pacific Bell / Pacific Telesis – Dominated much of California. Swallowed by SBC in the late 1990s, which later renamed itself AT&T. If you see an old "PacBell" tag, that copper pair is now serviced by AT&T California.
- GTE – A huge independent telco in California, Florida, Texas, and many rural areas. Merged with Bell Atlantic in 2000 to form Verizon. GTE's old territories are now largely Verizon or, in California, sold off to Frontier.

- MCI – Once the scrappy long-distance competitor to AT&T, especially big with businesses. It went through the WorldCom mess and accounting scandal in the early 2000s, then was acquired by Verizon.
- AirTouch – A West Coast mobile pioneer that spun out from Pacific Telesis. Eventually rolled into Vodafone, then into what is now Verizon Wireless.
- VoiceStream – A GSM carrier people remember from early Nokia days. Acquired by Deutsche Telekom and rebranded as T-Mobile.

That list barely scratches the surface. Older technicians in California still remember Continental Telephone (Contel), which fed into GTE, which became part of Verizon. Some remember Pacific Bell Mobile Services, which became Cingular, which later became AT&T Mobility. On an MDF in an office tower, you may still find labels that say “WorldCom,” “Level 3,” “Qwest,” “XO,” or “MFS.” Most of those assets are now part of Lumen (formerly CenturyLink), Verizon, or other large carriers.

When customers ask “What phone companies don’t exist anymore?” the honest answer is: the names faded, but their copper pairs and fiber routes are still very much alive.

Old dial-up internet companies and what came before AOL

Nostalgia about phone companies almost always blends into nostalgia about the early internet. People ask “What were the old internet dial-up providers?” or “What were the internet providers in the 90s?” with a kind of half-embarrassed grin. If you remember unplugging the house phone so you could tie up the line with a modem, you are in this club.

Before AOL became the pop-culture punchline, there were several major dial-up players:

You had CompuServe and Prodigy, which offered walled-garden services even before most people used the word “internet.” There were thousands of local ISPs: in California that included names like Best Internet, many of which were later absorbed by bigger players such as Verio, EarthLink, or local cable companies. EarthLink and NetZero were two of the big consumer dial-up brands in the late 90s, and they still exist today in more niche roles.

When people ask what was before AOL, the technical answer reaches back further. In the 1970s, what we now think of as the internet was called ARPANET, a research network that connected universities and government labs. When someone asks “What was the internet called in 1973?” that is the term you are looking for. There was no web browser, no “first website ever” yet, just terminal sessions and file transfers. The first widely recognized website, at CERN, went live in 1991, long after ARPANET’s early days.

Dial-up is mostly gone, but I still occasionally find an alarm panel or elevator system in California that quietly dials out on an old analog line as if nothing has changed since 1998.

From big 5 phone companies to today’s top 3

People toss around phrases like “the big 5 phone companies” or “the top 5 phone companies” without always defining what they mean. Historically, you could talk about the “seven Baby Bells,” or later about a top tier of AT&T, Verizon, Sprint, T-Mobile, and maybe US Cellular in the mobile space.

Today, in the U.S. Consumer market, if someone asks “What are the top 3 phone service providers?” or “Who is the #1 phone company?”, they are usually talking about mobile carriers, and the list is relatively clear:

Verizon, AT&T, and T-Mobile are the big three nationwide mobile networks. Market-share rankings flip slightly depending on how you count subscribers, but those are the dominant players. Sprint disappeared into T-Mobile in 2020, joining the growing list of phone companies that no longer exist as separate brands.

For landlines, the answer is more fragmented. AT&T, Verizon, Lumen (CenturyLink), Frontier, and a mix of cable companies like Comcast and Charter (Spectrum) handle most of the wired voice service, but a huge and growing share of “phone service” is now over the top VoIP from providers such as RingCentral, 8x8, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams.

If your question is “What is the alternative to Verizon for wireless?” the two realistic nationwide alternatives in the United States are AT&T and T-Mobile, plus many MVNOs (reseller brands) like Cricket, Metro, and Visible that ride on the big networks underneath.

Business phone systems: from key systems to the cloud

A lot of confusion in this space comes from mixing up phone service providers with phone system vendors. When someone asks “Who has the best phone system?” or “What is the best business phone system?”, they might mean hardware in their office, a cloud PBX, or the carrier itself.

Back in the 1980s and 1990s, a business phone system in California usually meant a key system or PBX from Toshiba, Nortel, AT&T/Lucent, Panasonic, or similar brands, connected to analog trunks or T1/PRI circuits from Pacific Bell, GTE, or a competitive local exchange carrier. Many of those PBX manufacturers have vanished or exited the market even as their hardware soldiers on in older buildings.

Today, most new business deployments skip on-premise PBX hardware and go with cloud-based phone systems. A few of the better known platforms include RingCentral, 8x8, Zoom Phone, Microsoft Teams with telephony, and Cisco’s cloud offerings. These are usually delivered as VoIP over an internet circuit, not over traditional TDM trunks.

From a consultant’s perspective, there is no single “best business phone system.” Instead, I look at call volume, reliability needs, regulatory requirements, and whether the client’s staff is more comfortable in the Microsoft ecosystem, the Google ecosystem, or something neutral. A call center needs very different features than a five-person law office.

When people ask “What is a business phone system?” the short, honest definition is: the combination of hardware, software, and carrier services that handle your incoming and outgoing calls, voicemail, and routing. Sometimes the carrier is the same vendor as the system. Sometimes they are different, even if it is all delivered in the cloud.

Landlines then and now: who still offers them, and for how long?

Landlines cause more stress and confusion than any other part of my practice, especially when children are trying to help aging parents. Questions come rapid-fire: Which companies still offer a landline? Can I just have a landline without internet? What is the cheapest landline phone service without internet? Which is the best landline phone provider for seniors? Will I lose my landline in 2027?

Who still sells real landline service

A “real” landline, in the traditional sense, is a POTS (Plain Old Telephone Service) line: analog, copper, powered from the central office, and able to work during a power outage. In California, AT&T and Frontier still maintain many POTS lines, especially in older neighborhoods and rural areas. Some smaller independent telcos in more remote counties also keep traditional POTS.

Cable companies and fiber providers sell “phone” service too, but most of that is VoIP over their own network, not a true POTS line. That means it may rely on a modem or ONT in your home and will not work in a power outage unless you have battery backup.

When you ask “Which companies still offer a landline?” the practical answer is: check AT&T, Frontier, and, depending on your region, Lumen/CenturyLink or local independents. They may try hard to upsell you to internet and VoIP, but regulated POTS is still there in many service territories as of the mid-2020s.

Can you still buy a landline without internet?

In most areas, yes, although it is getting harder every year. Carriers prefer to sell bundles, and some have stopped actively marketing standalone POTS. You can still usually order “voice only” service if you are persistent and clear, but the pricing is often not as cheap as people expect.

Customers often ask “Who is the cheapest landline provider?” or “What company has the cheapest landline?” In California, the answer varies by wire center. AT&T’s regulated voice service for seniors, under Lifeline or similar programs, can be relatively affordable, but the standard non-discounted rate for a single business or residential line has climbed steadily, often into the \$30–\$60 per month range before taxes and fees. Frontier and small independents can be a bit lower or higher depending on local tariffs.

If you genuinely need the cheapest landline phone service without internet, and you can accept a VoIP solution with a small adapter, companies like Ooma, Vonage, or some residential-focused VoIP providers can come out significantly cheaper than regulated POTS, especially if you already pay for broadband. They are not “original landlines” in the copper sense, but they work for many seniors if set up properly.

Will landlines be phased out, and what happens around 2027?

There is no single federal “landline shutoff year,” but there is a clear regulatory and technical trend toward retiring copper POTS in favor of IP-based services. Carriers have been petitioning the FCC for years to relax their obligations to maintain traditional analog lines.

When someone asks “What year will landlines be phased out?” or “Will I lose my landline in 2027?” you are usually hearing anxiety about those policy shifts. Some states have allowed carriers to stop offering new POTS in certain areas or to transition customers to VoIP or fiber with battery backup.

My practical advice:

If your household or business absolutely depends on a traditional analog line, start planning now. Look at alternatives: cellular home phone adapters, VoIP with proper backup power, or a combination of mobile and landline. Do not wait for a formal shutoff notice.

Landlines and seniors: simplicity still matters

I get a lot of calls from adult children asking about the simplest landline phone for seniors and the best landline service for senior citizens. They are usually trying to balance three things: reliability, cost, and ease of use.

For someone in their eighties who has used the same corded phone since the Reagan years, the most popular “operating system” is no operating system at all, just a dial tone and a handset. Smartphones feel overcomplicated.

For these cases, a traditional POTS line or a well-configured VoIP adapter with a basic big-button phone works best. Look for phones with loud ringers, visual ring indicators, and simple, clearly labeled memory buttons. There is no single “best” brand here, but AT&T-branded home phones, Panasonic, and some specialty senior-focused phones all do the job.

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If you need to know “Which company is best for landline phones?” in this [Phone Systems Company California](#) context, think of it in two pieces: the line provider (AT&T, Frontier, VoIP provider) and the handset manufacturer. Branded “senior phones” sometimes cost more than they should, but the right physical design genuinely reduces confusion and missed calls.

When someone asks “What’s the easiest phone for an elderly person?” I usually suggest:

Choose a corded or simple cordless phone with large buttons and a clear display, then make sure the service behind it is rock-solid and backed by a battery or generator if possible. Complexity is the enemy here.

The strange persistence of star codes: *82, *77, *69, and friends

Even in an era of smartphones and apps, a surprising number of people still use, or at least remember, the star codes on landlines. These were part of the central office switch programming, not your phone itself.

A quick reference for the ones I am most commonly asked about:

- *69 is used to call back the last number that called you, if the network supports it and the caller was not blocked.
- *82 unblocks caller ID for a single call, useful if you normally have your number restricted and need to show it for one call.
- *77 activates anonymous call rejection on some networks, blocking calls that show up as “private” or “anonymous.”

Not every carrier honors these codes, especially on VoIP or cable voice, and some have their own variations. But if someone in your family still uses a traditional landline, do not be surprised if they casually mention “I hit *69” as if

that is the most natural thing on earth.

Smartphones, brands, and security: what do the rich and famous use?

The blog keywords you see floating around search results make it sound like there is a definitive answer to questions like: What phone does Elon Musk use? What phone does Donald Trump use? What phone do most billionaires use? Which phone is least likely to be hacked?

In real life, those answers change, and a lot of what you read is guesswork based on photos and anecdotes. Public appearances have shown Elon Musk using various iPhones over the years, and Donald Trump was reported to use different smartphones (including older Android devices and, later, more locked-down phones) depending on the period and the security concerns around him. But there is no official, permanent answer, and high-profile individuals often carry more than one device for security and compartmentalization.

From a security standpoint, if you ask which phone is least likely to be hacked for the average user, a fully updated iPhone with strong passcode, Face ID or Touch ID, and no sideloaded apps remains a solid choice. That is less about magic hardware and more about Apple's locked-down ecosystem and fast security patching. High-end Android phones from Google, Samsung, and others can be very secure too, especially if you commit to regular updates and avoid untrusted apps.

When people ask "Which is the most popular smartphone operating system?" globally, Android has the larger market share. In the United States, the split is much closer, and iOS often leads among higher-income users. So if your question is "What is the top 1 phone in the world?" by pure volume it will be an Android model from a major vendor, but the specific model changes every year and varies by region.



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As of the mid-2020s, the top 3 best phone brands by global shipment share are typically Samsung, Apple, and a rotating third spot (Xiaomi, Oppo, or similar) depending on the quarter. If we broaden it to “What are the top 20 phone brands?” you get a long tail of manufacturers, many of which never sell officially in North America.

Major telecom and tech players: from 1990 to the present “big 7”

Telecom nostalgia often pairs with questions about broader tech. People remembering the biggest tech companies in 1990 usually name IBM, AT&T, DEC, maybe Hewlett-Packard or Compaq. Many of those names have shrunk, merged, or pivoted even as the networks they built remain.

Today, when people refer to “the 7 big tech companies,” they usually mean Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Meta (Facebook), Tesla, and sometimes Nvidia or a similar giant. These companies control much of the software and hardware ecosystem that rides on top of the networks the old phone companies built.

In the telecom-specific world, if you ask “What are the major telecommunications companies?” you are typically looking at AT&T, Verizon, T-Mobile, Comcast, Charter, Lumen, and a mix of regional carriers around the world such as Deutsche Telekom, Vodafone, Orange, and Telefonica. Many of them own or lease pieces of the same global backbone infrastructure.

The dark side of the internet, which people ask about as if it is a separate network, is really an overlay: encrypted services, hidden marketplaces, and abuse that rides on top of those same fiber links and peering points. The same network that carried your first AOL dial-up session now carries streaming video, enterprise VPNs, and traffic from both legitimate and criminal sources.

Living with what remains

If you stand in a central office or a large building’s main telecommunications room in California, you are surrounded by ghosts. Labels from companies that no longer exist sit next to new fiber jumpers lit by carriers your grandparents never heard of. Old split-pair repair notes from Pacific Bell techs sit in binders next to IP subnet allocations from modern cloud providers.

For practical purposes, here is how I frame it for clients and families who feel overwhelmed by the churn of brands and technologies:

You do not need to memorize every past telephone company or the top 10 most popular phones. Focus instead on what you need right now: a reliable dial tone for a senior relative, a business phone system that supports remote workers, or a mobile plan that gives you coverage where you actually live and work.

The history matters because it explains why your building has twenty riser cables from carriers that no longer answer their old 800 numbers. It matters because understanding that AT&T, Verizon, and T-Mobile sit on top of a century of mergers and divestitures will help you interpret what a salesperson is really offering.

But the lived reality is simple: despite the nostalgia, voice is just another application on top of a network that started as copper pairs, grew into fiber rings, and now carries traffic for services that would have sounded like science fiction to the technicians who first installed those lines.

If you are lucky enough to still hear a solid sidetone on a traditional analog handset, take a moment to appreciate it. Somewhere between that phone and the person you are calling, a whole genealogy of phone companies, past and present, is doing its quiet work.