



The 5 Signs You're Paying Too Much for Audio Conferencing

“You can be a rich person alone. You can be a smart person alone. But you cannot be a complete person alone.”

—Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*

Introduction

For all the social media tools, text messages, instant messages, and emails that connect businesses to consumers and to each other, there remains no substitute for a conversation. This isn't to say that asynchronous tools like Facebook or social CRM applications don't have value. In fact, they're invaluable to modern businesses. However, short of getting into cars, trains, and planes to bring stakeholders in a very flat world together, audio conferencing is an essential tool for clear communication and unfettered collaboration.

It's the rare company today that doesn't have customers scattered across the globe, business partners in wildly different time zones, and/or restricted travel budgets. A solid audio conferencing solution can prevent distances being a barrier. Whether you're talking about innovation and productivity, or being able to leverage and connect with teams anytime, anywhere, to drive development, productivity, sales, marketing, and growth.

Because conferencing solutions are so critical for so many enterprises, large or small, domestic or foreign, many are willing to pay hefty sums to ensure their reliability and utility. At the other end of the spectrum, many small businesses feel that they are priced out of such solutions and find themselves at a competitive disadvantage. What would happen if you had to pay to walk into a conference room for a meeting? Or talk to your colleague in the next cubicle? Not only would there be far fewer meetings (and, believe it or not, this would ultimately be a bad thing), but there would be far less work getting done. We can't develop the next killer app or coordinate supply chains in a vacuum.

The most robust conferencing solutions aren't free like those conversations around the proverbial water cooler, but neither do they need to be prohibitively expensive. In fact, they can be quite cost-effective. Read on to learn about the "5 Signs You're Paying Too Much for Audio Conferencing".



1. You're paying individually for services that should be included.

What happens to the bills that come into your organization? Most likely they head to someone in accounts payable who grumbles about his measly salary while cutting fat checks to various vendors. And the chances of the gentleman in A/P pouring over the bill looking for hidden charges is fairly low.

However, in the grand tradition of phone companies, most cloud-based VoIP conferencing providers layer on a variety of fees and charges for services that should really be standard in any full-featured audio conferencing solution. These “value-added services” can include:

- | **Paper invoice fees**
- | **Fees to add new moderators/hosts**
- | **Recording fees (more on that later)**
- | **Storage fees for recordings**
- | **International surcharges**
- | **Charges for no-show scheduled participants**
- | **Call setup charges**
- | **Call disconnect charges (yes, some really do charge for hanging up the phone)**
- | **Other unspecified “enhanced products and features”, whatever those are**

Given that many companies still need paper invoices to support recordkeeping and workflows, wish to empower their teams and make full use of their conferencing solutions by promoting staff to moderator roles, need to maintain recordings of important calls, etc., these sorts of fees will add up quickly. They can, in fact, be up to 20% of the bill on some services.

2. Toll free or not toll free – that is the question that you don’t get to answer.

It’s common practice to charge for access to toll-free numbers for participants. This is actually quite reasonable as it passes the cost for this convenience on to the business. Most conferencing solutions include a pool of toll-free minutes that can be used each month as part of the cost of service, again a reasonable approach to help companies stay within predefined monthly budgets.

However, those minutes evaporate quickly when businesses provide the toll-free number to hundreds of potential customers for a webinar, for example. All too often, businesses either have the choice of toll-free dial in to calls, toll dial-ins, or VoIP access from participants’ computers. Rarely, though, can they offer their customers a combination of these on a given call. When some callers use VoIP, others use local numbers, and the rest use the toll-free numbers, it’s far easier to conserve those precious toll-free minutes, especially since the overage charges tend to be quite high.

Flexibility in the use of toll-free numbers as well as the other forms of telephony available within your business and to potential customers and partners with whom your business interacts is critical

to deploying the most cost-effective audio conferencing solution. While most consumers enjoy free long distance on home and mobile plans, most still expect the availability of toll-free numbers when they engage with businesses.

Enterprise customers and partners often have restrictions on long-distance calling or may incur fees for long distance, particularly if they continue to rely on a PBX, making the availability of toll-free options even more important. Being able to offer toll-free call-ins in a cost-effective manner that enjoys full integration with local numbers and VoIP options (including integration with web-based meeting products) can save significant sums for businesses looking at audio conferencing platforms.

3. You're paying for every minute...give or take several thousand.

Some of the most widely used audio conferencing solutions charge a minimum number of minutes for every audio conference, regardless of how brief it might be. While we've all participated in interminable conference calls that hit these minimums several times over, countless ad hoc calls take place every day to quickly bring stakeholders together for swift decision-making, real-time updates on projects, and brief but essential collaborations and interactions. How many times have you joined a call just to take a moment and reschedule the meeting because a key decision-maker was called away at the last minute?

It may not seem like much, but \$5-\$10 minimum charges (most frequently on operator-assisted calls) on what should otherwise be \$1-\$5 calls add up fast. Calls are often billed as low as \$.04-\$.06/participant/minute, meaning that a \$5 minimum charge represents

roughly 100 minutes. Even with 5 people on a call, they would need to talk for 20 minutes or 25 minutes with 4 people on the call to reach the minimum. A 20-minute conference call is not a big deal in and of itself, but quick calls with small numbers of participants happen all the time; it's these that result in businesses being charged for thousands of minutes that they don't use.

Businesses looking to keep their audio conferencing costs low should be looking for solutions that only charge for minutes used with no minimums or hidden connection fees. This is especially important for organizations who wish to maximize their return in investment in an audio conferencing platform, using it frequently to encourage direct and efficient communications both within the company and with external stakeholders and customers.

In the same vein, audio conferencing solutions should provide real-time access to usage and billing information. Simply receiving an invoice at the end of the month means that decision-makers can't adjust usage, plan for budgeting, or build metrics reliably around conferencing. Audio conferencing providers have these data; there is no reason for the data to not be available to customers so they can understand the costs and usage patterns of their employees.



4. You're paying someone to make your calls for you.

Operator-assisted calls used to be the norm in audio conferencing. Moderators would call a central number, ask to have a conference call scheduled, and then distribute call-in information. While increasing numbers of providers also now allow users to set up their own calls in addition to using operators, this involves the provisioning of moderators. It can also take the form of so-called “reservationless conferences”, or phone bridges which function much like open rooms into which users can call and use at will (although this requires scheduling considerations on the user’s side).

In any case, the use of operator-assisted calls tends to come at a fairly high price, whether on a per-call basis or as part of a package. Given the overall savvy of most users and ubiquitous access to the web, it’s hard to make a case for paying a company to set up calls on your behalf when robust web-based scheduling, management, and provisioning tools are available from other vendors.

Similarly, because the cost of reservationless conferences tends to be lower, businesses should leverage these whenever workflows permit it. However, again, many providers significantly limit the size of reservationless calls to drive customers to use their higher cost solutions with the most lucrative large calls. Imagine, for example, that your company was running a customer Q&A session and expected to have as many as 500 callers following a product launch. As public call sessions go, especially in conjunction with web-based meetings or webcasts, this isn’t unusual, but some providers will limit such phone bridge sessions to 100 or 200 callers. What could have been a fairly cost-effective session suddenly needs to be set up by an operator and costs balloon.

The technology is there to manage these calls easily online and cut out the middleman of an operator, so to speak. There is no reason to use a provider that limits the use of efficient cost-saving tools for setting up calls internally.

5. You're paying for recordings (if you can get them).

Perhaps the greatest value of an audio conferencing solution is the ability to record sessions and use them later for internal analysis, training, podcasts, etc. Audio conferencing providers know this and many charge not only for the creation of such recordings, but also for the hosting and online storage of the media.

Similarly, by providing audio files as MP3s, audio conferencing companies could make them easily distributed, easily edited, and playable on virtually any device in the world. However, most do not use the de facto standard of MP3 audio, forcing users to convert files for wider distribution, introducing further time, effort, and cost into an already cumbersome workflow.

Again, as with the online management of calls, the technology is there to make easily reusable audio from recorded conference calls readily available to users. The cost to providers for such a service is minimal and yet the ability to access recorded audio is invaluable to the businesses that purchase these conferencing solutions. Because of the value to the organization, companies pay hundreds or thousands in storage fees, thousands in recording fees, and often have to wait several days for the conference provider to make them available.

Why? Because we are desensitized to paying too much for audio conference tools.

Summary

Audio conferencing should be easy. And it should be a cost-effective means of collaboration, customer interaction, and media relations. It should be affordable regardless of the size of an organization and it should be straightforward to manage with online tools by any users in an organization.

And yet, it remains surprisingly costly for too many organizations who accept the price as simply the cost of doing business. It doesn't have to be that way though. Looking at the five signs outlined here as you evaluate existing and new audio conferencing platforms will ensure that you find modern, easy, and, most importantly, cost-effective solutions to connect employees, customers, and stakeholders in this remarkably flat world.



About OpenVoice

OpenVoice audio conferencing provides high-quality conference calling that is easy to manage online. The service includes both toll-free and toll-based calling and convenient web controls that eliminate the need for operator assistance.

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