Phone Systems for Small, Medium & Enterprise Business: Which to Buy?

Read reviews on the leading five phone system brands in each category and understand why they lead their niche.

By Kristen Stanton

Are you shopping for a phone system for your business? Here's a listing and review of the leading phone systems on the market for small-sized, medium-sized, large-sized, and enterprise-level businesses, both on premises and hosted solutions. These are the top five providers for each category.

Small Sized Businesses

8x8
http://www.8x8.com

Product Overview
8x8 offers a hosted phone service solution, using the latest VoIP technology. All services are delivered directly over the Internet, so features can be accessed by employees who are in the office, traveling, or working remotely. With all hosted solutions, you'll need a fast and reliable Internet connection to ensure that business demands for phone usage as well as other activities relying on your Internet connection are supported, including Web and email usage. The system is designed for moderate to heavy phone users.

Editor's Notes

- 8x8 boasts low costs with the ability to cut your monthly phone bills by 50%.
- One of the best values on the market with many features included and service plans starting at $29.99 per user per month, with a $39.99 activation fee.
- Money back guarantee before 30 days.
- Manufacturer's 1-year limited warranty.
- Auto attendant
- Ring groups / hunt groups
- Hold music or hold message
- Call waiting
- Call park
- Do not disturb
- Call forwarding
- Voicemail
- Voicemail to email
- Conference calling
- Speakerphone
- Volume control
- Mute feature
- LED display
- Caller ID with name
- Caller ID blocking
- Direct phone numbers
- Internet and external ring tones
- Phone book capacity: 200 numbers
- Speed dial: 26 numbers
- Salesforce.com compatible

- Microsoft Outlook compatible
- Web-based account management tools

Vocalocity
http://www.vocalocity.com

Product Overview
Like 8x8, Vocalocity offers a hosted solution using VoIP technology, so service is delivered over the Internet. Features can be accessed by employees who are in the office, traveling, or working remotely. Low monthly costs, but consider how many add-on features you want, which can increase your costs each month, and compare with other services.

Editor's Notes:

- Low maintenance: Vocalocity maintains all the equipment, software, and upgrades.
- Easy to set up and scalable.
- Claims that businesses save 50-85% off traditional phone costs.
- Unlimited calling plans for a flat fee starting at $39.99, but there are metered plans for less frequent usage for $14.99 per month.
- You can choose from a selection of phones form different manufacturers, depending on the features you want, such as speakerphone, LED display, Bluetooth and Wifi compatibility, handset and headset compatible, etc.
- Comes with many quality key features, such as voicemail to email (mp3 files attached to email), transcribed voicemails; call logs that enable you to view reports of all incoming and outgoing calls in the system, Microsoft Outlook integration, and Web-based features and account management.
- However, many features are considered add-ons and come at an extra charge, such as: main company number, toll free numbers, conference bridge, and call groups.

Accolades:
Better Business Bureau Accredited Business and 2009 Internet Telephony Product of the Year.

Nextiva
http://www.nextiva.com

Product Overview:
As with 8x8, Nextiva offers a hosted solution using VoIP technology. Services are delivered over the Internet, so features can be accessed by employees who are in the office, traveling, or working remotely. Nextiva offers some very low rates – but for limited calling each month. It's important to know just how much each of your employees will be using the phone. Unlimited packages are slightly more costly than 8x8 and Vocalocity.

Editor's Notes:

- Easy to maintain and scalable
- Claims that businesses can reduce bills by 80%.

- Low minute usage packages are cheap, starting at $12.95 per month for 100 minutes, $24.95 per month for 500 minutes. But unlimited calling packages are more expensive than competitors at $69.95 per month.
- Plans include all key features, including 1 toll free or local number, auto attendants, voicemail, Web portal interface, etc.
- Provides an office manager login requiring a username and password where a manager can access every user, telephone, and extension within the company.
- Offers a personal customer service representative.
- No contracts or set up fees.
- 30-day money back guarantee.

Accolades:
2010 Internet Telephony Product of the Year, 2010 Best VoIP Service Which VoIP; 2010 #1 VoIP Provider Voice Reports

Fonality
http://www.fonality.com/

Product Overview:
Offers both hosted and server-based solutions. Fonality offers competitive pricing for the value. They recommend going with the server-based solution if you have over 20 employees, but server-based requires more up-front costs and ongoing maintenance by your own employees, which can take attention away from core business needs.

Editor's Notes:

- Standard hosted pricing starts at $24.99 per month per user, with no contract, and unlimited domestic calling. Ideal for companies with fewer than 20 employees.
- Professional- and Call Center-level hosted service starts at $39.99 and $49.99 respectively, and features such as conference bridges, extension groups, and report exporting, are included. Call Center service has a few more features that are included than Professional.
- Server-based service starts at a $595 one-time price and works with or without an Internet connection, ideal for companies with employees from 5-500.
- Provides detailed reporting – real-time call logs for all extensions and search filters.
- Can choose from a variety of phones.
- Hosted: No contract; low monthly payment.
- Unlimited domestic calls.
- Web-based features and account management.

Aptela
http://www.aptela.com

Product Overview:
Hosted solution, so low maintenance, scalable, and allows for remote employee usage. Aptela is on par with other leading providers in terms of basic services, but requires a monthly per-account minimum.

Editor's Notes:

- Offers basic features: auto attendant, audio files, customized hold music or messages, etc.
- Unlimited calling starting at $24.99 month per person, but calling plans require a $49.99/month account minimum. 250 minutes is $19.99 per month, with additional calls at $0.025 per minute.
- Boasts being energy efficient and supporting "green" initiatives.
- Service available with a variety of Polycom phone models.
- Add-ons include call recording, toll free numbers, and voicemail to text transcribing.
- Supports sending, receiving, and Web-based access to faxes.
- Administrator functionalities, including: loudspeaker paging, password management for all users, call history and other reporting access, hold music management, etc.

Medium Sized Companies

Medium Sized: Top 5 Hosted Solutions

M5
http://www.m5net.com/

Product Overview:
Hosted solution; low maintenance. M5 is a metrics-driven company with a focus on business intelligence, marketing campaign tracking, and results – values it transfers to its customers. Compelling case studies and awards differentiate this provider from the competition.

Editor's Notes:

- Sales and business intelligence tools including detailed online reporting, "business activity monitoring" - call volume by time of day, which callers take the most time and cost the company the most; customer service levels; etc.
- CRM tool integration and Web-based administration.
- Remote disaster recovery capabilities.
- Basic features including voicemail to email transcription, auto attendants, ring/hunt groups, find me/follow me, etc.
- Marketing focus: customized number for various marketing campaigns with call tracking.

- Ensures a consistent "phone experience" for callers across multiple locations.
- Compelling case studies with results and customer testimonials on website.

Accolades:
2009 Internet Telephony Product of the Year, 2008 Unified Communications Product of the Year, 2007 Internet Telephony Product of the Year, 2007 Internet Telephony Excellence Award, Pulver 100 2002-2007.

Telesphere
http://www.telesphere.com/

Product Overview:
Hosted solution offering standard set of features combining VoIP and Internet.

Editor's Notes:

- Currently serves customers in 40 states.
- No up-front costs.
- Claims businesses can save up to 40% from traditional telecommunication expenses.
- Compatible with a selection of Polycom and two Cisco phones.

Accolades:
2008 Product of the Year TMC Hosted Call Recording, 2008 **Most Innovative Disaster Recovery Service** Telephony Magazine.

Calltower
http://www.calltower.com

Product Overview:
A hosted solution that caters to the following business verticals: hospitality, healthcare, legal, non-profits, real estate, and call centers. Focuses on a "unified communication system" that integrates applications, communications, and devices through a common interface. Flexible system, but with some complex features, so be sure to be very clear about your phone system needs before considering this option so you don't pay for features you don't need.

Editor's Notes:

- Integrates: telephony and messaging, email, chat, mobile devices, Web, and video.
- Supports the following technologies: Cisco Unified Communications Manager, Microsoft Office Communications Server, Microsoft Exchange Server, ActiveSync, Blackberry, and Good Messaging Server.
- Provides the following in infrastructure and services: Advanced ACD/call center, Tier 1 Internet with BGP routing, Cisco-powered network, MPLS VPN data connectivity, and multiple secure collocation facilities.

- Boasts zero capital expenditure, reduced operating expenses, multiple application support.
- Provides a100% uptime guarantee – and credits the customer's bill if it fails to meet the guarantee.
- 24x7x365 customer support.
- SAS70 certified.
- Simplified billing.
- Web-based administration.

Smoothstone
http://www.smoothstone.com/

Product Overview:
Hosted solution caters to: financial, healthcare, legal, manufacturing, and travel industries. Provides the basic features, but as with Calltower, be sure you're very clear about your phone system needs before considering this provider so you don't overpay for features you're not using.

Editor's Notes:

- Unified messaging - access to voicemail and fax messages from a phone, email client, Web client, or mobile device.
- Web-based tools and administration.
- Domestic and international calling plans with direct inward dialing (DID), unlimited local calling, four–digit on–net calling, and E911.
- Real-time monitoring that shows calling patterns and activity at any time, with detailed reporting.
- Provides a powerful call management and routing platform, allowing for management of calls routed within and across the organization, in all locations.

Geckotech
http://www.geckotechllc.com/

Product Overview:
Hosted solution combining phone and Internet, caters to nearly every business vertical: IT, professional services, manufacturing, legal, health care, real estate, non-profit and government. Straightforward, no nonsense service, focused on simplifying phone systems for customers. Make sure you're clear about phone needs to ensure this provider can meet every thing you need.

Editor's Notes:

- All phones and hardware are included.
- Free maintenance and 24/7 customer support.
- Boasts 99.9% up time, Cisco-powered network.
- Compelling customer testimonials on site.
- Scalable.
- Web-based administration.

- Simplified billing and dedicated customer service rep.

Accolades:
No. 1925 in the Inc. 5000 in 2009.

Medium Sized Companies
Top 5 On Premises Solutions
(Hosted Solutions also Offered)

Cisco
http://www.cisco.com/cisco/web/solutions/small_business/products/voice_conferencing/small_business_voice_systems/index.html

Product Overview:
Cisco is able to deliver virtually all of the features of an enterprise-level communications system to medium-sized businesses (up to 500 employees) - cost-effectively. Both on-premise and hosted solutions are available. Cisco has a solid focus on helping companies increase employee productivity, and is a Wheelhouse Editor's Top Pick due to its flexibility and selection.

Editor's Notes:

- Cisco's unified communications systems provide virtually ever feature and tool a medium-sized business can use, including all necessary phone features, online account management, Web conferencing, and video conferencing.
- The company works with a variety of local partners and resellers, which can be found on their website.
- The services are flexible enough to work with a variety of phones from various manufacturers.
- System is designed for phones and applications to work together. You can link your customer relationship management (CRM) system or other applications, whether your business is healthcare, insurance, auto repair, etc. - to communications system to help your team respond faster.
- Basic phone system features include "find me, follow me," hunt groups, call forwarding, multiple voicemail accounts, hold music, call forwarding, and three-way conferencing, as well as a range of security features.
- Features also include the latest telephony technology, including Cisco Unified IP Phones and a variety of applications.
- The on premise solution can integrate multiple applications on a single appliance server, thus reducing capital and operational expenses.
- Easy to set up - the system automatically detects and registers new Cisco IP Phones in the network, then runs its configuration options on an easy-to-navigate Web interface. A centralized architecture makes it easy to install, upgrade, and manage.
- Charges on a per-user basis.

- Analog adaptation: existing analog lines can be easily integrated into your digital service.
- Employees can access information and communicate from anywhere, using any device, on any network.

Altigen
http://www.altigen.com/

Product Overview:
Altigen produces its own phones and offers both on-premised and hosted services.

Editor's Notes:
- System designed to enable customers to leverage their own investments in their IT infrastructure, including Microsoft, Intel and VMware™, while delivering advanced functionality at a low total cost of ownership.
- Altigen continuously enhances software vs. focusing on hardware-based systems, which eventually become obsolete.
- The flagship products is called MaxCommunications Server (MaxCS), which is a complete, software-based solution designed with an open architecture, and built on industry standard Intel™ based servers, SIP™ compliant phones, and Microsoft-based application infrastructure solutions.
- Supports up to 5,000 users.

Mitel
http://www.mitel.com

Product Overview:
An on premises solution, Mitel offers affordable entry-level phones as well as products that deliver advanced applications to the desktop, including a broad range of analog, digital, and IP phones, consoles, conference units and peripherals. Company has a special focus on ergonomics, feature-richness, and voice quality.

Editor's Notes:

- Provides a broad selection of its own phones, as well as software and communications infrastructure.
- Provides unified communications solutions: messaging, mobility, Web and video conferencing, etc.
- Integrated with leading business applications: IBM, Microsoft Exchange/Outlook, Office and OCS.
- Caters to a variety of business verticals: healthcare, professional services, education, hospitality, retail, financial services, education, government, automotive, and manufacturing.
- Also has a special focus on emergency and disaster preparedness.

Accolades:
2009 Internet Telephony Product of the Year, 2009 Technology Marketing Corporation's Customer Interaction Solutions Magazine Product of the Year Award, 2009 IP Contact Center Technology Pioneer Award, 2009 TMC Labs Innovation Award.

Toshiba
http://www.telecom.toshiba.com/

Product Overview:
Toshiba provides both on premised and hosted IP business telephone systems.

Editor's Notes:
- Solution entitled Strata® CIX™ enables users to mix and match technologies, creating a pure IP system or a converged solution, and flexible enough to change based on the needs of your company.
- Scalable solution that supports communications from home offices, start-up locations, branch offices, and even customer locations.
- Focus on helping users unify, coordinate, and streamline communications
- Offers basic features, including enterprise-wide and from centralized locations – auto attendant services, single voice mail system, unified call center operations, simplified internal extension dialing, etc.

Panasonic
http://www.panasonic.com/business/office/telephone-systems/

Product Overview:
On premises solutions offering

Editor's Notes:

- Works with a variety of local resellers, which can be found on their website.
- Offers affordable solutions.
- Focuses on reliable technology.
- Flexible system is designed to scale.
- Includes some additional enhancements.

Large and Enterprise-Level Companies

Shoretel
http://www.shoretel.com/

Product Overview:
Provides IP phone systems, unified communications, and built-in contact center. Refreshing focus on simplicity and making it easy for customers. Caters to nearly all verticals: financial services, health care, professional services, retail, manufacturing, government and education.

Editor's Notes:

- Charges up-front costs, but offers a low-cost total cost of ownership guarantee.
- User-friendly tools enabling centralized management and continuous network monitoring with Web-based interface.
- Streamlined management of all voice applications across all locations.
- System monitor enables users to proactively address performance issues.
- Distributed architecture includes an array of open interfaces that seamlessly integrate third-party information and applications: business process integration, open APIs, and IBM foundations.
- Compelling customer testimonials with demonstrated savings using Shoretel services.

Cisco
http://www.cisco.com/en/US/products/sw/voicesw/index.html

Product Overview:
Cisco enterprise-level communication systems are best of breed and a Wheelhouse Editor's Top Pick for the broad selectio of features and tools to address every large business' communication needs.

Editor's Notes:

- Communications infrastructure
- Customer contact
- Conferencing
- IP telephony
- Telepresence – mobile, Web conferencing, video conferencing
- Unified communications and unified messaging
- Emergency responder services
- Large companies can get virtually every communication system and feature they can dream of with Cisco.

Vertical
http://www.artisoft.com/

Product Overview:
Caters to large, multi-store enterprises, including: pharmacies, restaurants, grocery stores, offices supply stores, and automotive dealerships.

Editor's Notes:

- Consolidates voice, data networking and voice applications into a single integrated platform that can be managed centrally with detailed accuracy.
- Allows users to track, manage and optimize voice communications, capitalizing on communications as well as sales and business information channel to support your core business goals.

- System serves the called while offloading routine inquiries from busy in-store associates.
- Aggregates data at the individual store and department level to track the customer experience, reveal and resolve call management problems, and evaluate and optimize your enterprise-wide communications infrastructure.

Avaya
http://www.avaya.com/usa/

Product Overview:
One of the largest companies in the space, provides hosted and on premises solutions. Caters to education, financial services, health care, and hospitality sectors.

Editor's Notes:

- Offers solutions for a variety of enterprise communication needs: customer service operations and linking remote employees, corporate, branch offices, and customer service centers; as well as centralized control.
- Detailed tracking and reporting functionalities.
- Provides a broad selection of desk phones, conference phones, and handsets.
- Provides three levels of unified communications platforms that support mid- to large-sized enterprises: Avaya Aura™, Communication Server 1000, and Communication Server 2100.

NEC
http://www.necunifiedsolutions.com/main/Solutions/SolSolutionsMain.asp

Product Overview:
NEC's communications systems are just one product line among many for this multinational corporation. Provides a variety of services to support enterprise-level communications, including: call center applications, IT telephony, remote worker support, unified communications, etc.

Editor's Notes:

- Provides the broad range of enterprise-level communication services, including IP telephony, centralized administration control and tracking, video conferencing, etc.
- NEC's boasts large-scale flexibility and for its enterprise communications systems.
- Enables communicating from one location to another via networking using standard Public Switching Telephone Network (PSTN) facilities or via a customer provided Wide Area Network (WAN).
- Focuses on scalability and providing a variety of options for the user, as well as the role of the end user in determining best communication methodologies and technologies to use for a given situation.