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Comment: Emails from America: Getting a cellphone

An Englishman's view of tech USA

by Stuart Miles published on 19 June 2009

So as you may or may not have heard I've moved to the US for the next 6 months to set up a US office for Pocket-lint. I'll be based out of New York on the east coast. Very exciting, but while Americans speak our language, it's clear even from being here just a couple of weeks, that we are in fact two very different people.

No I am not talking about the pronunciation of Tomato or that the word satnav doesn't really exist here in the US of A, but that well, things are different.

So until Christmas I am going to share in these emails home experiences of America from a Englishman's perspective.

When you edit an online technology site, being connected is pretty much on the top of things that are important. This week getting the office set up has involved getting Internet and getting that all-important mobile (or should I say cell) phone sorted.

When you are a citizen of a country with no plans to move, the notion of a long contract isn't really ever an issue, however take away that 2-year time frame (the average length of a contract now) and it becomes a little more interesting.

Basically it seems that anything smartphone-ish and high-end comes with a 2-year minimum contract time with a termination fee if you want to get out early. That termination fee is around \$200 and unlike the UK you have to pay for most of the phones available regardless how much you are going to put down in calls packages each month.

Back in Blighty, I could walk into a Carphone Warehouse and come out with the latest and greatest handset without parting any cash. I've



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done it before and will most likely do it again. Here it's a different matter. Want the new Palm Pre and you're looking at \$300 down for the phone, a \$70 - \$100 price package a month and then a \$200 exit fee, making 6 months expensive for a bit of email and twitter.

Of course there is pre-pay or pay-as-you-go, however for the most part that means settling with a mobile phone that I wouldn't even give to my 3 year old. It might be good enough to make calls, but that's about it.

So trawling the wonders of Sprint, AT&T, T-Mobile and Verizon in midtown New York brought up a number of low-end solutions within an affordable price range.

The final selection? An AT&T SIM with a Nokia 2610 thrown in for free for \$20.

I have gone from using the latest smartphones (we get them in regularly to review at Pocket-lint) to something that doesn't even have a 16m-colour screen?

Why didn't I go for something a bit snazzier? Well a BlackBerry, even the now ancient 8300 Curve, was around \$400 with the iPhone 3G coming in around \$600 - \$700. Ouch.

Which makes me wonder, there must be a market for people who want a cheap smartphone on pay-as-you-go legitimately.

To be honest I'm not really fussed about all the apps, but I do want the Internet and I do want social media stuff like Twitter (sad I know) so I can stay in touch with the chaps back in the UK.

In the UK that "calling" is somewhat answered by the INQ1 on 3, however it's still a regular keypad handset rather than touchscreen or QWERTY offering.

So what's been the solution I've ended up with?

Well after toying with the idea of finding some dodgy dude in some dodgy shop to unlock my Vodafone-tied BlackBerry Bold, I'm going to buy an old cheap iPhone 3G (probably an 8GB version) and slip in a pre-paid AT&T SIM.

The pre-paid SIM, which came with that rather charming Nokia 2610 should work, and while I am going to have to pay \$20 for 100MB of data, it seems like a better option than the \$\$\$ I would be paying for the contract version of the same phone over the next couple of months.

Still, this method is a bit around the houses, a bit of a grey solution and, well a bit, of something that I would rather not do. I would much prefer to go and buy a handset, without paying hundreds of dollars so I can get online and stay "connected".

It seems in America, you can't do that, and I think that's a real shame, but that's nothing compared to 3G data cards.

Stuart Miles is currently living in New York setting up the Pocket-lint US office.