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Network Telephone charging customers monthly fee for tech support

By Mark Watson
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Just as consumers often call their Internet service providers when a problem persists with their computer, small businesses often call voice-and-data telecommunications providers when a problem starts with their phones and computers.

Since Network Telephone, a competitive local phone company focused on the small business market, was getting these calls anyway, the company decided to make the service a \$19.95-a-month add-on to its telecom services for small businesses.

Called TechLine, the service was launched in August and was rolled out to Memphis customers this month.

"It's basically a help desk for small businesses that don't have the resources to help their software or hardware issues," said Jamie Spicer, Network Telephone's area sales manager.

TechLine helps customers with items as varied as E-mail problems, virus protection or trouble with a mouse, said Clare LaGrand, corporate communications for Network Telephone, based in Pensacola, Fla.

"We think it will be really helpful for them," Lagrand said.

"This is a great deal," said Edward Horrell, a Memphis-based telecom consultant. "Users who don't need technical answers aren't going to buy it. Those who do need tech support are going to wear it out."

Dr. Brian Janz, a management information systems associate professor and associate director of the FedEx Center for supply Chain Management at the University of Memphis, said he would expect Network Telephone's service to be "extremely effective or informative" if it is going to incur a charge.

"We've all had varying degrees of success with online tech support - some good, some bad - but most all of the systems I am aware of are free of charge," Janz said.

Gil Hennon, who chairs the Memphis Personal Computer Users Group education committee, said, "TechLine telephone and networking tech support would be attractive, especially to small businesses that don't get dedicated BellSouth employees on site if it is coupled with quick repair services."

Bill Ray, BellSouth's West Tennessee regional director, said his company

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includes technical support for customers.

"Our customers have several inroads to our expertise in Internet, equipment, broadband and traditional telecommunications, beginning with their account executive," Ray said in an E-mail. "My reaction would be that BellSouth understands our customers' needs and their demand for excellent customer service. I can understand why competitors would want to distinguish their customer service. We have and will continue to look for ways to improve our customer service edge. So far we have not added an additional charge for what the customer expects."

Jonathan Harlan, president of Aeneas Internet & Telephone of Jackson, Tenn., said his company offers this kind of service at no additional charge.

Jeff Presley, president of Custom Data Solutions, said WorldSpice Technologies, a local Internet service provider, provides tech support to clients for no additional fee "and are very responsive and technically competent."

Bob Palmer, Data Guidance Group president, said some business customers might find such a service valuable.

"If they can provide a 'front-line' service to provide such simple solutions as machine restarts, etc., there might be some businesses interested in the service at \$20 per month," Palmer said.

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