

If you grew up in California in the 1990s, you probably remember the sound before the internet: the crackle of the phone line, a burst of static, then the stuttering handshake of a 28.8 or 56k modem. For a lot of households, that screech was the sound of possibility, but it also tied your brand-new online life directly to century-old telephone infrastructure.

Looking back at that era explains a surprising amount about the telecom landscape today: why landlines are vanishing, why some old phone companies do not exist anymore, and why the internet still feels more like a phone network in some ways than most people realize.

This is a look at how it actually felt to use dial-up internet and phone systems in 1990s California, and how that world evolved into the services we argue about now: who has the best phone system, who is the cheapest landline provider, and which companies still offer a landline at all.

Before dial-up: when the phone company was just “the phone company”

People who ask “What was the old phone company called?” are usually thinking about AT&T before the breakup. For most of the 20th century, the answer in much of America was simple: Ma Bell.

By the early 1980s, the Bell System in the United States was a single regulated monopoly, formally the American Telephone and Telegraph Company and its local Bell Operating Companies. In California, the residential name most people knew in the late 70s and early 80s was Pacific Telephone, which became Pacific Bell, often shortened in conversation to “Pac Bell.”

In the 1980s, the landscape of telephone companies looked roughly like this:

- A parent long-distance company: AT&T Long Lines.
- Regional Bell companies, including Pacific Bell in California, handling local service.
- Independent local carriers like GTE in parts of Southern California and some rural areas.
- Competitive long-distance carriers like MCI and Sprint, creeping into consumer consciousness through aggressive advertising with callback codes such as 10-321 and 10-10-220.

If someone asks “What were the telephone companies in the 1980s?” in a California context, the most honest answer is that you had Pac Bell and GTE for local service, and AT&T, MCI, and Sprint fighting for your long distance.

The breakup of AT&T in 1984 set the stage for everything that followed: multiple long-distance carriers, the rise of “CLECs” (competitive local exchange carriers) in the 1990s, and later, the big re-consolidation into today’s major telecommunications companies.

Copper, POTS, and the sound of a 56k modem

By the 1990s, the entire dial-up world sat on top of a very old foundation: twisted pairs of copper connecting homes and businesses to central offices.

Technically, that basic service was called POTS, short for “plain old telephone service.” It was analog, circuit-switched, and designed for voice frequencies from about 300 Hz to 3.4 kHz. Not exactly built for the web.

Yet it worked remarkably well. A typical California home in 1994 had one or two copper pairs running back to a neighborhood pedestal or pole, then on to a central office. If you ordered a second line “for the internet,” a technician might come out, punch a new pair down on the distribution block, and suddenly your teenager could tie up one phone line with a 33.6k modem without blocking grandma’s calls.

People now ask: “Do landlines still work without internet?” and the honest answer is that the original landlines were the internet for most households back then. Dial-up internet traffic was simply a call from your house, across the voice network, to a modem at your internet service provider.

Power failures showed one of the advantages of those systems. Central offices had battery backup and generators, so POTS phones usually worked when the grid went out. Your big beige desktop computer did not, but a simple corded phone kept dialing even in a blackout. That reliability is part of why a lot of seniors still ask for the best landline service for senior citizens rather than relying only on mobile phones.

The California dial-up experience: who you actually dialed

When people remember “the old internet dial-up providers,” they often name AOL first. That makes sense nationally, but in 1990s California, the picture was a bit wider.

AOL, CompuServe, and Prodigy were big names, and you could absolutely dial them from California, but there was also a strong ecosystem of regional and early national ISPs. Names you would see in local newspaper ads and on flyers at computer shops included Netcom (founded in the Bay Area), EarthLink (very strong in Southern California), and dozens of local outfits in each metro area and college town.

To answer “What were the internet providers in the 90s?” in California, think of at least these:

- America Online (AOL) - the mass-market giant with software bundles and chat rooms.
- Netcom - a Bay Area pioneer that offered early nationwide dial-up and shell accounts.
- EarthLink - very prominent by the late 90s, especially in Southern California.
- Prodigy and CompuServe - older services from the 80s that bridged into the web era.
- Regional ISPs tied to universities and local tech communities, often running on a shoestring.

For many of us, the first experience of going online was not “the internet” as we mean it now. It was logging into these services, which had their own email systems, forums, file libraries, and gateways out to the broader internet.

When someone asks “What came before AOL?” or “What was before AOL?” in a historical sense, the answer includes CompuServe (founded in the 1960s as a timesharing company), The Source, Genie, and a sprawling world of BBSs, especially in California’s tech-heavy regions. By the late 80s, teenagers with US Robotics modems were dialing bulletin board systems run from somebody’s bedroom, trading shareware and warez, long before they ever saw a web browser.

From ARPANET to the first website: what the internet was called

Another question crops up a lot: “What was the internet called in 1973?” In 1973, the main network was ARPANET, a research network funded by the U.S. Department of Defense’s Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). It linked universities and labs, including several in California such as UCLA, Stanford, and UC Santa Barbara.

The word “internet” in that era referred more generally to interconnected networks following TCP/IP, but it was still a technical term known mostly to researchers. The public did not think of “using the internet” at all.

The modern consumer web emerged in the early 1990s. The first website is generally credited to Tim Berners-Lee at CERN in 1991. In 1993 and 1994, graphical browsers like Mosaic and then Netscape Navigator started finding their way onto home computers in California. That is when dial-up lines, modems, and consumer ISPs suddenly mattered a lot.

Business phone systems in California offices

While kids were tying up the family phone line at home, California businesses were dealing with a different question: “What is a business phone system?”

In the 1990s, a typical office in Los Angeles, San Diego, or the Bay Area would have a small PBX (private branch exchange) sitting in a closet, or it would subscribe to a Centrex-style service from Pacific Bell. The PBX handled internal extensions, voicemail, and basic call routing. Brand names like Nortel, AT&T/Lucent, and Panasonic dominated.

A business phone system in that context meant a few concrete things: multiple lines from the phone company, desk phones with extension keys, hunt groups, auto attendants, and sometimes conference bridges. For many small offices, the phone bill had separate entries for local service, long distance, “trunk” lines, and occasionally early data or ISDN services.

If you compare that to a modern VoIP system, which many now consider the best business phone system, the differences are obvious. The wiring has moved from punch-down blocks to Ethernet, and the brains have moved from a box in the closet to a data center. Yet the basic requirements are similar: incoming calls must find the right person, the call should be clear, and the whole thing must keep working when the power flickers.

This older world is relevant when you ask who has the best phone system now, because many businesses still evaluate new technology in terms of those old metrics: reliability, voice quality, and support, not just features.

Star codes, privacy, and the art of *69

Because dial-up and phones shared the same copper, people learned a set of star codes that lived at the intersection of telephony and privacy.

In the 1990s, feature codes were more visible, sometimes printed in small booklets that Pacific Bell left behind after an installation. A few of them still generate questions today, especially from people who still have true landlines, or who are migrating to VoIP that mimics them.

Here are some of the most referenced codes and what they historically did on a landline:

- *69 was Call Return. Dial it after getting a call to automatically dial back the last incoming number, where technically available.
- *82 unblocked your caller ID for that call if you had line blocking enabled, so the person you called could see your number.
- *77 typically turned on Anonymous Call Rejection in many regions, so calls from people who blocked their caller ID would be rejected.

The exact behavior varied a bit by carrier and region, and still can. On VoIP-based landlines offered by cable companies or fiber providers, the codes may work, partially work, or be replaced with app-based controls. Anyone relying on these today should check their specific provider’s documentation.

The “big five” and today’s fragmented telecom giants

People often ask “What are the big 5 phone companies?” or “What are all the major phone companies?” The answer depends on whether you mean fixed-line, mobile, or global telecoms, and whether you are [Phone Systems Company California](#) asking about the 1990s or today.

In 1990, the biggest tech companies overall were not the ones we talk about now. IBM, AT&T, DEC, HP, and companies like Xerox and Motorola loomed large. Apple was still recovering from the 1980s. The seven big tech companies we talk about currently - Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Meta, Tesla, and Nvidia - simply did not occupy the same space yet.

Telecom specifically in the 1990s looked like a patchwork: AT&T for long distance, the regional Bell companies for local service, GTE in independent territories, and rising mobile carriers that later consolidated into Verizon, AT&T Mobility, T-Mobile, and Sprint (before its merger with T-Mobile).

If someone asks “Who is the #1 phone company?” today, globally, it is more about mobile subscribers and smartphone shipments. On the carrier side, massive international operators like China Mobile have more lines than any U.S. Carrier. On the handset side, the answer shifts every few quarters, but companies like Apple, Samsung, and sometimes Xiaomi or Oppo fight for the top 1 phone in the world by shipment volume.



MANAGED IT SERVICES COMPANY CALIFORNIA
Method Technologies
10805 Holder St., Suite 100, Cypress, CA 90630
(844) 463-8463
<https://www.mtinc.net/>



For California consumers in the 1990s, though, the relevant names on the bill were simpler: Pacific Bell or GTE for the line, AT&T or MCI for long distance, and a dial-up ISP for internet access.

Old phone companies that changed names or vanished

When people ask “What phone companies no longer exist?” or “What phone companies are out of business?” they often remember brand names from that dial-up era.

Some examples tied to California and the broader U.S.:

Pacific Bell still technically exists as a legal entity but brands were absorbed under SBC and then AT&T. GTE merged into Bell Atlantic to form Verizon. MCI, once a symbol of competition with AT&T, went through the WorldCom scandal and ultimately ended up part of Verizon. Countless competitive local exchange carriers and small ISPs appeared in the late 90s, signed up customers in office parks from San Jose to Irvine, then disappeared or were acquired.

These changes complicate questions like “What companies now support original landlines?” Many of the original copper plant owners still do, but under new logos, and often with technology transitions going on behind the scenes.

Landlines today: who still offers them and for how long

Modern questions such as “What year will landlines be phased out?” or “Will I lose my landline in 2027?” reflect a genuine trend rather than a specific worldwide shutdown date.

In the United States, there is no single year when all landlines vanish. Instead, carriers are steadily retiring copper in favor of fiber and wireless solutions, subject to state-level regulation. In the United Kingdom, there has been a widely publicized shift toward all-IP services around 2025 to 2027, which contributes to the confusion.

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For Californians who remember dial-up days and simply want a voice line now, the more relevant questions are:

Can I just have a landline without internet? In many areas, yes, but it might be delivered over fiber or cable rather than over traditional copper. Pricing can be higher than people expect, because carriers increasingly see standalone voice as a legacy product.

Which companies still offer a landline? The big names are AT&T (including its successor entities from Pacific Bell), cable providers like Comcast (Xfinity Voice), and a variety of VoIP providers that can tie into traditional phones with adapters.

What is the cheapest landline phone service without internet? Or, more practically, what company has the cheapest landline? Prices vary significantly by location and by whether it is copper POTS or digital voice. In many U.S. Markets, a barebones digital voice line can run in the rough range of 20 to 40 dollars per month before taxes and fees. Traditional regulated POTS, if still available, can be similar or higher. Discounts for seniors exist in some regions, but they are not always advertised clearly.

How much is an AT&T landline per month for seniors? AT&T participates in programs like Lifeline for low-income customers, and some states have senior-focused discounts, but the exact monthly cost depends on tariffs and local packages. If someone is researching the best landline service for senior citizens, they should check both regulated lifeline options and simple, no-frills VoIP offerings that work with existing handsets.

For elderly users, the “best” or simplest landline phone for seniors is often a big-button, corded phone with clear volume controls and no complex menus. That simplicity matters more than which company is best for landline phones in an abstract sense. The same principle applies when people search for the easiest phone for an elderly person on the mobile side: the user interface and physical design matter more than the brand.

Smartphones, operating systems, and security: a brief contrast

When you jump from dial-up in the 1990s to modern questions like “Which is the most popular smartphone operating system?” the scale change is dramatic.

Today, Android holds the largest global market share, while iOS dominates certain premium segments and has particularly high share in markets like the United States, including California. If you are ranking the top 3 best phone brands by global shipments, it usually comes down to Samsung, Apple, and one of the major Chinese manufacturers such as Xiaomi, Oppo, or Transsion, depending on the quarter. A longer list of the top 10 most popular phones or the top 20 phone brands changes constantly as devices cycle and new markets grow.

From a security angle, people often wonder which phone is least likely to be hacked. Security is less about brand mystique and more about timely updates, locked-down app stores, and user behavior. A fully updated iPhone with strong passcodes and minimal sideloading is generally harder to compromise than an unpatched budget Android phone running outdated software. That said, high-value targets, such as political leaders or billionaires, face threats from nation-state-grade spyware that can compromise almost any smartphone.



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22600 Savi Ranch Pkwy, Yorba Linda, CA 92887
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Questions like “What phone does Elon Musk use?” or “What phone does Donald Trump use?” tend to fascinate people, but reliable public information is sparse and changes over time. There have been credible reports of various iPhones and secure, hardened devices being used at different moments, but no fixed, verifiable answer that applies across years. The same goes for what phone most billionaires use: some prefer iPhones for ecosystem and perceived security, others use high-end Android phones. These choices tell you less about technical quality and more about personal preference and corporate ecosystems.

The operating system world has also evolved since the era of desktop dial-up. On the mobile side, if you list the five mobile operating systems that have mattered in the last 15 years, you would mention Android, iOS, and then historically Windows Phone, BlackBerry OS, and perhaps Symbian. On desktops, the top 10 most popular operating systems include variants of Windows, macOS, and Linux, with ChromeOS rising in certain segments. If someone asks more academically for the five operating systems as a concept, the list usually includes Windows, macOS, Linux/Unix, Android, and iOS as dominant families.

These modern discussions echo the old dial-up debates: people still compare platforms, reliability, and which company is the top 1 phone company or the top 3 phone service providers in their region.

The dark side of the early internet

Nostalgia for dial-up sometimes glosses over the darker aspects that were already present. So when someone asks “What is the dark side of the internet?” it is worth remembering that much of that darkness is not new.

Even in the 1990s, California users saw spam email, phishing attempts, pirated software on BBSs and Usenet, and early forms of online harassment. Child exploitation and other serious crimes existed then just as they do now,

albeit on a smaller absolute scale. Slow speeds did not prevent people from sharing illegal content; it simply made it slower and slightly more inconvenient.

On dial-up, the main constraints were technical friction and the relative difficulty of discovering harmful material. Today, recommendation algorithms and high-speed access have widened the reach of both helpful and harmful [Phone Systems Company California](#) content. The infrastructure changed from modems squealing over POTS to fiber and 5G, but the underlying human behaviors did not.

Alternatives to the giants: then and now

In the 1990s, people with a technical bent in California often sought alternatives to mainstream choices. Instead of AOL, they picked a local dial-up ISP that offered shell accounts and USENET feeds. Instead of sticking with AT&T long distance, they memorized 10-10 codes or switched to Sprint for a marginally better rate.

Today, the question “What is the alternative to Verizon?” carries that same spirit. On the mobile side, alternatives include AT&T, T-Mobile, regional carriers, and a raft of MVNOs that ride on the big networks but offer different pricing. For fixed broadband and phone, you might choose a regional fiber provider, cable company, or independent VoIP provider rather than a traditional incumbent.

Some things have not changed much. When people ask who has the best phone system, the answer is still “it depends what you need.” Reliability, honest pricing, and support often matter more than the logo on the bill. For seniors, the best landline phone provider for seniors might be the one that offers easy billing, simple repair processes, and compatible big-button handsets, rather than the cheapest theoretical plan on paper.

What remains of the dial-up era

The last dial-up modems in California mostly went silent by the early 2000s, displaced by DSL, cable, and then fiber. The telephone company that carried those calls changed names, merged, and pivoted into broadband. Internet providers that once advertised “56k access” reinvented themselves as DSL and hosting providers or vanished completely.

Yet traces of that era remain everywhere:

Area codes that were split and overlaid during the dial-up boom still structure California’s phone map. Feature codes like *69 and *82 still exist, even when the underlying network is VoIP over fiber. Questions about landline phase-out and which companies still offer a landline echo an older fear from the 90s: whether the phone company would tolerate the internet using “its” lines at all.

Behind the nostalgia for modem tones is a lesson. Entire systems that feel permanent can be upended in a decade or two. In the 1980s, AT&T looked immovable. In the 1990s, Pacific Bell felt like a fixture of California life. Today, both the internet and “the phone company” are more fragmented, more global, and somehow more fragile.

Remembering the dial-up days in 1990s California is not just about the past. It sharpens your sense of how communications infrastructure works now, who controls it, and how quickly it can change, whether you are choosing a landline for a parent, a business phone system for an office, or the next smartphone in a market crowded with brands that did not even exist when modems still sang over copper.