

Stand in front of a California central office building from the 1980s and you would have seen a quiet brick or concrete structure with a few trucks outside, often with a Pacific Bell or GTE logo on the door. The network inside carried almost nothing but voice. Fast forward to today and that same building feeds fiber, 5G backhaul, cloud connections, and yes, a shrinking number of traditional landlines.

The story of past telephone companies versus today's major telecom providers in California is really a story about monopoly to competition, copper to fiber, and voice to data. Along the way, a lot of company names disappeared, a few old brands survived in surprising ways, and landlines went from household utility to a niche service, especially for seniors and certain businesses.

This article walks through that arc with a California lens and answers many of the specific questions that come up when people compare the old phone world with what exists now.

What the phone landscape looked like in California in the 1980s

If you lived in California in the 1980s, you probably only dealt with one local telephone company. The phrase "the phone company" was enough. For most of the state, that was Pacific Bell, known casually as "Pac Bell." In some areas, particularly more rural patches, you might have had GTE or a small independent carrier.

The simplest way to picture it is this: local phone service was a regulated monopoly, and long distance was starting to open up to competition.

The old "Bell System" and its breakup

For much of the 20th century, AT&T was "the old phone company" in America. It controlled the Bell System, which included Western Electric (equipment), Bell Labs (research), and local Bell operating companies. In California, the Bell company was Pacific Telephone & Telegraph, which later became Pacific Bell Telephone Company.

A landmark antitrust settlement in 1982, implemented in 1984, broke up AT&T. The Bell System was split into seven regional Bell operating companies, often called the "Baby Bells." Pacific Bell ended up under a holding company called Pacific Telesis. So when people ask "What was the name of the telephone company in the 80s?" in California, the practical answer for residential users is often Pacific Bell, even though AT&T remained a long distance and equipment powerhouse.

Some of the past telephone companies Californians dealt with

A few of the key names from that era:

Pacific Bell (Pac Bell). The dominant local carrier in most of California. If you remember rotary phones with a heavy handset and a monthly "message unit" charge in urban areas, Pac Bell likely sent your bill.

GTE. A major independent phone company that served many suburban and rural pockets in California. GTE later merged into what became Verizon's wireline business in the region.

Contel and other independents. Smaller local exchange carriers served certain rural communities and mountain or desert towns, each with its own quirks and tariff sheets.

AT&T Long Lines and MCI, Sprint, and others. For long distance, you might remember dialing an access code or choosing a "primary interexchange carrier." AT&T, MCI, and Sprint were the big three names on those glossy long distance flyers.

These were the core “past telephone companies” people in California interacted with day to day. The choices were limited, the pricing rigid, and almost everything ran over copper pairs from your house to the central office.

Dial up, the early internet, and what came before AOL

When people ask “What were the old internet dial up providers?” they usually mean the consumer services that took off in the 1990s. But the story starts earlier.

In 1973, before the word “internet” caught on, researchers used ARPANET, a packet-switched network funded by the U.S. Department of Defense. ARPANET is the answer to “What was the internet called in 1973?”, although at the time it was one of a few interconnected research networks rather than a public service.

Commercially, what came before AOL in the consumer sense were services like CompuServe and The Source. In the 1980s and early 1990s, these “online services” used dial up over ordinary phone lines. You installed special software, dialed a local access number (to avoid toll charges), and connected at speeds that now look comically small, from 300 bps to 56 kbps.

By the mid 1990s, several dial up providers had a significant presence in California and across the U.S. When people ask “What were the internet providers in the 90s?” or “What are the old dial up internet companies?”, the short list usually includes:

1. America Online (AOL), which popularized chat, email, and the idea of being “online” for ordinary households.
2. CompuServe, an earlier and more technical service that predated AOL.
3. Prodigy, launched by IBM and Sears, with a graphical interface ahead of its time.
4. EarthLink, an early ISP that focused on open internet access rather than a walled garden.
5. NetZero, known for its “free” ad supported dial up access.

Behind all of those, the local telephone companies, including Pac Bell and GTE in California, provided the copper loops and local calling areas that made dial up affordable. You still paid your phone line, then on top of that you paid the dial up service.

The first website ever, created by Tim Berners-Lee in 1991 at CERN, lived at <http://info.cern.ch>. That site introduced the World Wide Web concept, but Californians typically saw it through Netscape or early versions of Internet Explorer layered on top of their local phone lines and their chosen dial up provider.

From Baby Bells to today’s major telecom providers

The California phone map changed repeatedly in the 1990s and 2000s as companies merged and rebranded. Keeping track is difficult even for people who worked in the industry.

Pac Bell’s parent, Pacific Telesis, was acquired by SBC Communications, which itself was a former Baby Bell out of Texas. Over time SBC bought several Baby Bells, then in a twist of branding, SBC adopted the AT&T name. That is why today’s AT&T is both the descendant of the original long distance AT&T and the owner of former Bell operating companies such as Pacific Bell.

GTE merged with Bell Atlantic to form Verizon in 2000. Verizon eventually sold its California wireline network (the old GTE territories) to Frontier Communications in 2016. Many customers experienced that shift, often noticing billing changes and, sometimes, service hiccups.

So when people ask, “What phone companies no longer exist?” or “What phone companies are out of business?”, it is often less a matter of true extinction and more a question of mergers and rebrands. Pacific Bell, GTE, MCI, and

WorldCom do not issue bills anymore in California, but their networks and assets live under AT&T, Frontier, and various backbone providers.

On the other hand, some companies truly left the scene. WorldCom's scandal and bankruptcy in the early 2000s effectively erased the brand. Smaller competitive local exchange carriers (CLECs) from the late 1990s dot com era, such as NorthPoint Communications, also shut down.

Who the major telecom players are in California now

For residential and small business customers in California today, most voice and data services flow through a handful of large providers, even if you buy through a reseller or a mobile virtual network operator (MVNO).

Major wired and wireless telecom providers in California typically include AT&T, Verizon, T-Mobile, Frontier, and cable based operators like Comcast (Xfinity) and Charter Spectrum, plus Cox in some areas. They occupy different roles: AT&T and Frontier inherit much of the copper plant and traditional "landline" footprints, while cable companies provide VoIP based home phone over coaxial networks. Wireless giants like Verizon and T-Mobile dominate mobile and are also leaning into fixed wireless home internet.

If someone asks "What are the major telecommunications companies?" or "What are all the major phone companies?" in a California context, those names are the backbone of the list. If you stretch to a national or global lens, you quickly add companies like Comcast, Charter, Lumen (CenturyLink), Canadian and European incumbents, and wireless heavyweights in Asia.

Landlines: who still offers them, how they work, and how long they last

One of the most common questions from Californians is whether they can "just have a landline without internet." Underneath that are several more specific questions: Which companies still offer a landline? What companies now support original landlines? Who is the cheapest landline provider? What is the best landline service for senior citizens?

The difference between true POTS and VoIP "home phone"

First, it helps to distinguish between two types of "landline" services.



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Traditional analog Plain Old Telephone Service, often shortened to POTS, is provided over copper loops from your premises to the central office, with dial tone and power supplied from the network. This is what most people mean when they [Phone Systems Company California](#) say “original landlines.” In many parts of California, this kind of POTS still exists, especially in older neighborhoods or rural areas, and yes, it can work without local internet at all.

VoIP based home phone service uses your broadband connection, whether fiber, cable, or fixed wireless. A small adapter or your router converts voice to data packets. It can feel like a landline, but it depends on local power and internet. Many cable companies and some fiber providers sell this as “home phone,” but it is not original POTS.

In California, as of mid 2020s, companies that still offer some form of landline without internet include AT&T (in legacy wire centers), Frontier (in many former GTE territories), and a patchwork of smaller independent local exchange carriers. You can still ask for a stand alone voice line, although the pricing can be surprisingly high compared to introductory bundles.

Cable providers like Comcast Xfinity, Spectrum, and Cox sell home phone that rides on their own broadband networks. Technically this is managed VoIP, but for everyday use, most customers simply consider it their landline.

Cost, senior plans, and the “cheapest landline” question

“Who is the cheapest landline provider?” and “What is the cheapest landline phone service without internet?” rarely have simple answers, because each provider layers on taxes, fees, and local surcharges. However, some patterns are consistent in California.

Pure POTS has become a premium, not a bargain. A basic measured service line from AT&T in California, before taxes, can easily run in the \$25 to \$40 per month range, sometimes more, and that is without long distance. Non promotional cable VoIP lines land in roughly the same band or higher, often bundled with other services.

For seniors, discounts help. California seniors with low income may qualify for the federal Lifeline program and the state's California LifeLine discounts, which significantly reduce monthly charges for voice or broadband. This can make AT&T or Frontier among the best landline providers for seniors who qualify, even if their rack rate pricing looks high.

When customers ask, "How much is an AT&T landline per month for seniors?", the honest answer is that it varies widely by plan, location, and discount eligibility. A LifeLine supported voice line might cost under \$10 in some scenarios, whereas a non discounted POTS line with calling features can exceed \$50 after fees.

For non qualifying seniors who simply want reliability and a familiar handset, cable phone bundles sometimes come out cheaper on a per service basis, especially if home internet or TV is already in the mix.

Can you keep a landline without internet, and do they still work when the net is down?

In California, you can still order a stand alone landline in many areas. You do not need internet service. So the short answer to "Can I just have a landline without internet?" remains yes for most, though the number of options is shrinking.

Whether that line still works when the internet is down depends on the underlying technology:

If you have true POTS, your phone will work as long as the copper loop and the central office equipment have power. Central offices typically have substantial battery backup and onsite generators. A basic corded phone that draws power from the line will keep running even during a local power outage at your home.

If you have VoIP based home phone, you need your modem or router powered and, typically, a live broadband connection. Some providers install battery backups for a few hours of service, but a prolonged outage will eventually take the line down. In emergencies, this distinction matters.

For seniors or rural households who value that resilience, a copper POTS line or a cellular based home phone with battery backup can be the best landline service for senior citizens, even if it costs more than newer options.

When will landlines be phased out?

There is no single year when all landlines in California or the U.S. Will shut off. The question "What year will landlines be phased out?" surfaces frequently, and numbers like 2027 sometimes circulate, often borrowed from other countries' plans or specific carrier filings.

What is actually happening is gradual deregulation and retirement of copper plant. Carriers like AT&T have filed in several states to be allowed to discontinue legacy POTS in certain areas, especially where fiber or fixed wireless can provide replacements. California regulators have been cautious, weighing public safety, rural connectivity, and competition.

So if someone asks, "Will I lose my landline in 2027?", the fair answer is: not automatically and not everywhere. Some neighborhoods will keep copper for quite a while, particularly where no equivalent alternative exists. Others will transition to fiber or wireless based voice. The direction of travel is clear, but the timeline is patchwork.

Feature codes on landlines: *82, *77, *#69 and friends

Many Californians grew up with feature codes on their phones. They still exist on many landlines and even some VoIP and mobile services, although support can vary.

Here is a compact reference to some of the most commonly asked about codes, as implemented on many U.S. Landlines:

1. *82 usually unblocks your caller ID for the next call if you normally block your number.
2. *77 often activates anonymous call rejection, which blocks calls with “anonymous” caller ID. To turn it off, providers typically use *87.
3. *69 is commonly “last call return.” It dials back the last number that called you, sometimes for an extra fee.
4. *67 blocks your caller ID for a single outgoing call, showing “private” or “anonymous” on the other end.
5. *72 and *73 are often used to turn call forwarding on and off, though exact behavior can differ by carrier.

If you are unsure which codes your provider supports, it is wise to check the online feature guide for your specific landline or VoIP service.

Business phone systems then and now

A “business phone system” used to mean a physical PBX in a back room, often from AT&T, Nortel, or Panasonic, with punch blocks on the wall and rows of extension cables. Technicians would show up with butt sets and tone generators, labeling everything by hand.

Today, a business phone system is usually a cloud based platform that provides numbers, call routing, voicemail, auto attendants, and integrations with collaboration tools. Instead of buying a box, companies subscribe to a service.

For a California business evaluating “What is the best business phone system?”, the answer depends on the size and nature of the operation. A small law office in Fresno might run just fine on a cloud PBX from a provider like RingCentral, Nextiva, Zoom Phone, or 8x8, using existing internet connectivity. A large enterprise with offices in Los Angeles, San Diego, and the Bay Area might run a hybrid model with SIP trunks feeding Cisco or Avaya systems tied into Microsoft Teams.

The trade off is control versus simplicity. On premises systems give tight control over call flows and local survivability if the WAN goes down, but require in house expertise. Cloud systems are easier to manage and scale, but depend on reliable broadband and a solid provider.

Mobile, smartphones, and the new meaning of “phone company”

When people say “phone company” now, they often mean mobile carriers more than landline providers. Questions like “Who is the #1 phone company?” or “What are the top 3 phone service providers?” typically point to wireless.

In the U.S. By subscribers and coverage, the big three are Verizon, AT&T, and T-Mobile. In California, all three operate extensive 4G LTE and 5G networks, augmented by a web of MVNOs like Metro by T-Mobile, Cricket (on AT&T), Visible (on Verizon), and others. If you are looking for an “alternative to Verizon,” you might land on T-Mobile or AT&T, or on an MVNO that uses the Verizon network but sells service differently.

Globally, when people ask “What are the big 5 phone companies?” or “What are the top 5 phone companies?”, they often mean smartphone manufacturers rather than carriers. In recent years, the top global smartphone brands by shipment usually include Apple, Samsung, Xiaomi, Oppo, and vivo, with others like Transsion rising in specific regions.

Operating systems: Android, iOS, and a shrinking long tail

On the software side, the answer to “Which is the most popular smartphone operating system?” is straightforward globally: Android, by a substantial margin in unit share. In the U.S., including California, Android and iOS often split the market more evenly, with iOS holding a strong lead among higher income segments.

If you list “What are the 5 mobile operating systems?” historically, you might include Android, iOS, Windows Phone (now discontinued), BlackBerry OS, and Symbian or perhaps HarmonyOS in China. At present, Android and iOS dominate to the point that others are statistically tiny.

Broadening the view, “What are the top 10 most popular operating systems?” could include desktop and server systems such as Windows, macOS, various Linux distributions, Android, iOS, and specialized embedded OSs. In daily life in California, most people interact primarily with Windows, macOS, Android, and iOS.

Phones, brands, and what wealthy people actually use

There is a certain curiosity around “What phone does Elon Musk use?”, “What phone does Donald Trump use?”, or “What phone do most billionaires use?” The honest answer is that usage is fluid, and high profile individuals occasionally change devices for security or image reasons.

Public sightings and reports in recent years have frequently shown Elon Musk using various iPhone models. Donald Trump was widely reported to have used an older Samsung Galaxy device during the 2016 campaign, then a more locked down government issued iPhone after taking office. Many CEOs and billionaires gravitate toward high end iPhones or flagship Android phones, partly because enterprise IT departments standardize on them and partly because of app ecosystems and status signaling.

If you ask “What is the top 1 phone in the world?” at any given moment, it usually refers to the single model with the highest recent sales or active installed base. In multiple market reports in the early 2020s, recent iPhone models such as the iPhone 14 or iPhone 13 Pro Max frequently show up as the top selling single devices, even though Android dominates in total units across many brands.

When people look for “What are the top 3 best phone brands?” or “What are the top 20 phone brands?”, most lists start with Apple and Samsung, then move through a mix of Chinese and regional makers: Xiaomi, Oppo, vivo, Huawei in countries where it still ships Google free phones, Google’s own Pixel line, and others like OnePlus, Realme, and Motorola. The long tail includes niche manufacturers and specialized rugged or secure phone vendors.

The question “Which phone is least likely to be hacked?” rarely has a neat brand answer. Security comes from timely updates, careful configuration, and user behavior. That said, iPhones with current iOS versions and Google Pixel phones with monthly security patches often receive praise from security professionals, along with hardened devices sold to governments and large enterprises. For some users, a simple feature phone or a stripped down smartphone with minimal apps reduces the attack surface, although it does not eliminate risks.

When seniors ask “What’s the easiest phone for an elderly person?”, the answer might be a basic voice centric handset like a Jitterbug or a simple Android phone with a large font launcher, rather than any flagship device.

The shadow side of connectivity

The evolution from regulated phone monopoly to hyper connected internet has brought its own problems. Questions like “What is the dark side of the internet?” capture that ambivalence.

On the telephone side, the shift from analog to digital, from national carriers to global networks, enabled robocalling at scale, caller ID spoofing, and sophisticated phone scams. Many Californians experience that daily, even as carriers and regulators fight back with STIR/SHAKEN authentication and filtering tools.

On the internet side, the same networks that carry voice and email also carry malware, organized crime activity, illegal marketplaces, and disinformation campaigns. ARPANET’s research roots and the early optimism of the first website gave way to a much more complex and often darker reality.

Telecom providers in California sit in the middle of that tension. They enable emergency 911 calls and telemedicine, power remote work and education, but also find themselves at the center of debates over privacy, surveillance, and platform responsibility.

Looking ahead: from copper and voice to fiber, cloud, and devices

The biggest tech companies of 1990 were very different from the so called “7 big tech companies” commonly referenced today. Back then, IBM, HP, DEC, and AT&T itself stood out. Now, when investors talk about the “Magnificent Seven,” they usually mean Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Meta, Tesla, and Nvidia. Telecom carriers like AT&T and Verizon remain large and essential, but no longer dominate technology narratives.

For Californians, the practical questions remain grounded:



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Which companies still offer a landline if my parent wants a simple corded phone? Can I keep my number if I move to VoIP or to a mobile only household? Which mobile provider has the best coverage in my neighborhood? What is the best business phone system for a 20 person firm with remote staff?

The answers increasingly involve a mix of infrastructure providers and over the top services rather than a single vertically integrated “phone company.” That is a long way from Pacific Bell trucks in the driveway and a single black rotary phone in the hallway, but the core need has not changed much. People still want reliable, understandable, fairly priced ways to talk to each other, whether over a copper pair in Fresno, a fiber link in San Jose, or a 5G signal on a trail above Los Angeles.