

VERIZON FIOS VS. COMCAST CABLE

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Both Comcast cable and Verizon FIOS (fiber optic cable) services are available in our area. Both can provide TV, Internet, and telephone functions. The availability of FIOS is relatively new and although quite limited geographically is daily becoming more widespread. In fact, nationwide FIOS is currently available to some extent in only one third of our states, Florida being among them.

Both services are light years ahead of dial-up, DSL, wireless, or any other type of category we call broadband Internet service. The fact that many of us now have both cable and FIOS from which to choose has opened some very important considerations for us in costs, reliability and features.

Technically, Comcast utilizes cable composed of copper wire strands that carry electromagnetic impulses throughout their journey. Verizon FIOS uses fiber optic glass strands less than the thickness of a human hair that carry laser light impulses that are converted to electromagnetic impulses at their destination. Fiber optic glass wire cable is considerably more technically advanced and sophisticated than copper wire cable.

That competition is a great motivator of progress is best illustrated by the fact that cable services have remained relatively static for many years. Since the advent of FIOS competition, Comcast is now offering very significant and numerous upgrades and improvements in both services and products. For the consumer, it's a definite winner. Let's look at some of the services both companies offer and see how they match up.

TV: Users report a consistently cleaner and sharper picture with greater user satisfaction when using FIOS. How meaningful that will be depends a lot on your level of visual acuity. Here again, your TV equipment itself plays an important role. All else being equal, FIOS appears significantly ahead in this category.

TELEPHONE: Both FIOS and Comcast offer similar phone packages that include unlimited U.S. and Canada calls, caller ID, call waiting, and voice mail. Both will retain your current phone number if you engage its services. However, that is where the similarity ends. FIOS phone service is direct to and from Verizon, whereas Comcast Digital Voice phone service is mediated through your cable connection to your computer. If your cable service is down for any reason, you lose your phone. To even report the problem, you must have either a cell phone or you need to go knocking on your neighbor's door who will hopefully have a functional phone.

The problem can be a lot more serious than inconvenient, considering that you lose emergency 911 along with your phone. I have lost my own phone for varying lengths of downtime due to cable service problems at least once a month or more during the period of a year. One of those interruptions left me without any phone service for 4 consecutive days. On another occasion, my incoming calls were non-functional for almost 2 weeks.

Based on personal experience, I have found Digital Voice to be unreliable at best. Consequently, for health and safety reasons, we do not recommend Digital Voice unless you have a ready cell phone backup for emergencies.

INTERNET: The costs of Internet service are approximately equal. Both offer similar packages and upgrades regarding upload and download speeds. However, there is a significant difference in speed consistencies. FIOS is a direct connection between your house and Verizon. Cable is a line you share with a number of other cable users in your area. The more users that are on line with you, the slower your connection can be.

Additionally, the translation can vary at the user end is where the quality, speed and efficiency experienced is modified by the user's computer configurations, software, hardware, and network connections. All else being equal, the upload speed of FIOS is significantly greater than Comcast. The speed of both upload and download appears more consistent in FIOS.

SIZE MATTERS: For various reasons, Comcast frequently chokes on sending email with attachments totaling more than 4MB. They advertise 10, but the real world is more like 4. FIOS advertises 10, and in fact 10 appears to be functional.

INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDING: In an exhaustive study by PC World of the 20 most popular Internet service providers, FIOS came out #1 best in 9 categories of customer satisfaction, quality and dependability. Comcast was #13 in ranking, falling below average in the categories of customer service, technical support, and spam blocking. Verizon FIOS was the only ISP in the entire list rated above average in every category.

TECH SUPPORT: Each company offers 24/7 tech support. The technicians for each appear on the whole to be knowledgeable and helpful. Users report very considerably more tech support calls with lower satisfaction to Comcast than to Verizon.

DOWN TIME: Many users report a frequent and significant number of cable service interruptions due to either cable problems or maintenance. It appears that Comcast diligently addresses these outages, but their frequency is irksome to customers. It seems that some of these problems are caused by digging (by landscapers and other service-related workers) that damages underground cable lines. FIOS being the much newer service has not been around long enough for determining, but it would be reasonable to assume that their underground lines maybe subject to the same vulnerabilities or possibly others of a technical nature although neither water or electricity harms glass fiber cable as against copper wire.

In the event of an electrical outage, Comcast claims to be able to provide battery power at their end. Verizon installs a battery package at the customer's home for the same purpose.

So far, the few FIOS users that have offered an opinion in this area have reported no down time at all. Again, a comparison in this regard would perhaps be unfair considering the very much greater number of cable users and the greater time during which they have had cable service.

STORM VULNERABILITY: With regards to hurricanes and other storms, the Achilles heel of Comcast cable lines is that they are located on overhead (poles) and consequently more storm vulnerable for a distance from their point of origin at Comcast to a point where they are buried underground to arrive in your area and at your home. FIOS is completely buried from its point of origin.

COST and BILLING: This is an area where you need to be both inquisitive and watchful. First and foremost, bear in mind that you are not dealing with corporate entities. Each company is running a business that is on the whole honest and not deceptive, but like most businesses, is very much focused on its bottom line.

Both companies offer similar packages at almost identical costs. Each offers incentives at reduced rates and frequently does not remind you that these are time-limited. You may well find yourself somewhere down the line angrily staring at a bill with a whopping increase in what you had been paying up to then because your bargain incentive period had expired. Be very sure to determine how long your sign up price will last and what it will jump to after that. You also need to find out to what you are obligated by contract and what not.

Carefully watch the word, “free.” You may be lured by a “free” service that suddenly, somewhere down the line you are being charged for. The usual company explanation is that the service was only free during a “trial” period. It underscores the importance of careful questioning, recording answers, and examining your monthly bills for any charges you either don’t understand or find objectionable. It would amaze you as to how many people just pay monthly bills blindly without examining them for discrepancies.

New users also need to carefully question installation fees. Verizon currently offers free installation. Comcast requires an installation fee for adding Internet or Digital Voice to a current TV provided premises. The application of different fees with either company tends to vary from time to time.

You should examine your bills carefully each month. Errors are not unusual and may take you several months of frustration and annoyance to straighten out to your satisfaction. In fact, billing problems are probably the prime source of the complaints we have received and is frequently the result of the customer’s failure to properly understand what services are being provided, at what cost, and for what period of time. Remember too that bills are basically prepared by humans who are not infallible.

Don’t order any services unless you both fully understand exactly what you are getting and you carefully write it all down including the name of the person to whom you spoke, what they said, and the date they said it. Don’t feel guilty about taking their time. Their pay is the same whether they speak to one customer or ten in any given period of time!

If you cannot resolve a billing problem on your first try, immediately request to talk to a supervisor and be sure to keep a full record of your conversation.

SWITCH and CONTRACTS: It bears repeating that it is vitally important to fully understand what you are getting and at what obligation. Don’t trust your memory. Write

it down. Are you signing a contract? Have you retained a copy? What are you locked into and for how long? What if you are dissatisfied and want to switch, is there a penalty from your current provider? Will your alternate provider accept you and at what cost? These are issues that appear to change frequently as the two companies arrange and rearrange their policies in pursuit of customers. Even when a policy exists, both companies have shown flexibility when it is in their best interests and in the pursuit of customer satisfaction. Caveat emptor and don't be shy!

You need also to remember that if you switch from one company to the other for internet services, your email address is going to change. That can pose a very significant annoyance to some of you.

PREMIUMS AND COME ONS: Both companies offer a sizeable variety of extra benefits for signing on. Don't be lured by extra channels, anti-malware and other software, and a number of other goodies that you may never use. Focus on basic services!

Each company has offered a recent article in the Sarasota PC Monitor that summarizes its features, Verizon in May and Comcast in July. You may want to refer to these. Both companies are community-oriented, reliable, reputedly honorable, and well established. In making your choices, you need to decide which offers what is most important to you. If you subsequently find that either does not meet your expectations, the other will likely be glad to welcome you and very possibly offer incentives to gain your business. You may also find that the company with which you may be dissatisfied is also willing to offer incentives to keep your business. There are no hard and fast rules. Don't be bashful about asking or negotiating. The squeaky axle gets the grease!