

Be wary of 'free' laptop mobile broadband deals, warns Broadband Genie

By Genie Group

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Consumers should be careful when looking at 'free' or subsidised laptop deals, claims broadband comparison website Broadband Genie. As well as ending up tied to a highly restrictive two-year contract, customers face a very limited choice of machines.

"Many people are buying mobile broadband for the first time, and getting their first laptop, perhaps thinking it is free of charge" said Broadband Genie editor Chris Marling. "These deals can sound great on paper, but in truth the choices are very limited, the contracts long, and consumers may get more value from buying a laptop and dongle separately."

The current subsidised laptop deals from Vodafone, T-Mobile, 3 and Orange tie users into 24-month contracts on a variety of tariffs, with all of them seeing the consumer paying back the cost of the laptop over the course of the contract. While this will appeal to some, especially those wanting to spread out the cost of the laptop, there are other options. Laptop makers such as Dell offer their own finance offers, while those at university may find a better deal by using their student loan to buy the right laptop.

Dean Bubleby, mobile broadband consultant at Disruptive Analysis, agrees, saying consumers should consider other ways of purchasing their laptop. On Vodafone's Dell Mini 9 laptop deal, he remarks: "It's interesting to compare Dell's own finance options, rather than Vodafone's subsidy model. Another thing to note is that the operator-spec notebooks don't always offer the full range of options to the customer in terms of memory, disk size etc."

Subsidised laptop offers limit choice to one or two machines per broadband supplier; however, there are more than 100 models on the UK market today, ranging from as little as £175, and prices are falling all the time - as indeed they are for mobile broadband itself. Dell's Mini 9, for example, can be bought direct from Dell in a variety of specifications from £249.

All of the current mobile broadband deals from the major suppliers can be compared at independent comparison website <http://mobile.broadbandgenie.co.uk> where consumers will also find advice, guides and reviews, as well as comments from genuine customers. It is easy to compare laptop deals, but also to compare them to dongle-only packages by price, contract length, speed and download limit.

Marling continues: "Consumers need to consider whether they think the broadband deal they are signing up for today will still be offering value 18 months down the line. Competition on pricing between the mobile broadband providers is fierce, and prices are falling while speeds are rising as this young technology matures."

There are now a host of prepay options available too; with prepay dongles available for as little as £30. Bubleby adds: "In tough economic times, many people are unlikely to want an additional monthly commitment."

Another important consideration is the shelf life of laptops themselves. While people using a laptop as their main machine often upgrade as often as every 18 months, those using them for more mundane tasks or as a 'road warrior' (a secondary machine used only when travelling) can happily go as long as five years with the same machine. Consumers who already have a laptop, and are unsure of their financial position, should ask themselves if they really do need that shiny upgrade.

And finally, for those who do sign up for a 'free laptops' deal a word of caution; make sure you mark down the closing date of the contract. Marling concludes: "Remember, you are paying a subsidy for the length of the contract - as soon as that contract ends, you should be looking to move to an unsubsidised deal, or you will still be paying that added premium for the laptop."

Vodafone and 3 have both improved their subsidised laptop offers in recent weeks, while O2 is rumoured to be joining the market soon. Orange has just added two more laptops to its range, while T-Mobile also offers a range of deals.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

1. Broadband Genie is the UK's leading independent broadband and mobile broadband comparison website, providing consumers with an unbiased source of information on broadband prices and contracts and allowing them to compare broadband providers in an independent. Broadband Genie was launched in March 2004 as the first dedicated consumer comparison site for broadband, while Mobile Broadband Genie was the first independent mobile broadband comparison site, launched in October 2007. Both sites are among the most popular sites in their respective fields, and regularly feature in the national press. <http://www.broadbandgenie.co.uk> / <http://mobile.broadbandgenie.co.uk>

2. All queries and interview requests should be directed to Chris Marling at Broadband Genie: t 0844 415 5531 / f 0871 6618553 / m 07908 327303 / chris.marling@genieventures.co.uk

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