



Television Service

From the Office of Minnesota Attorney General Lori Swanson

Whether you tune in for a single show or a full list of channels, it's important to know your rights with cable, satellite and local television service providers.

What kind of service is available?

Your television service options depend in part on where you live, and in part on the TV and other services you use. You can often find out what services are available in your area by checking with your local government office or local library. Here are some key points to consider if you seek broadcast, cable, or satellite service in your area:

Local service:

If you plan to watch only over-the-air broadcast channels, you may not need a subscription service. To get free over-the-air channels, you only may need a digital television or a converter box that receives digital signals, and an antenna. In 2009 the major TV stations began broadcasting only digital signals, dropping older analog TV signals. For more information, visit www.DTV.gov.

Cable service:

One way to view more than over-the-air broadcasts is with a subscription to a cable service. State and federal laws require cable providers to get permission from a local franchising authority, which usually is the city in which you live. Cable companies may choose the channels and services offered, with a few exceptions. Cable companies are required to offer a level of "basic service," which often includes local stations as well as public, educational, and government access channels. The company may choose to add programming to the basic service, though it is required to offer customers at least a pay-per-view and pay-per-channel (e.g. HBO, Showtime) options. You may wish to call your city to learn more about cable service in your area.

Satellite service:

An alternative to a cable subscription service is a subscription to a satellite service. The location of your home can affect whether you receive satellite service. Some apartment and condominium buildings prohibit residents from attaching a satellite dish to the property. In addition, some people may have trouble getting a good satellite signal for clear service. This problem can occur when the dish does not have a clear line of sight to the satellite in the sky. Other factors, such as trees, buildings or other obstacles, can block the signal to the home. Reception problems may be caused by a poor dish installation or simply a bad geographic region for service. Check with the satellite provider to see what options exist.

The programming offered by satellite service is often very similar to cable, with some exceptions. Satellite providers cannot always offer the same local channels as cable service. Some individuals find that they need to install a "rabbit ear" or roof-top antenna in combination with a satellite dish to receive local channels. Others find that satellite service cannot provide local access channels that are exclusively offered with cable service. Before you sign up for satellite service, you should ask for documentation of which channels the company can provide you.

Internet TV:

Depending on what you watch, you may find that you do not need a subscription television service, and may prefer to access on-demand TV, movies, music and other services by attaching to your TV an internet-connected computer, where you can access a wide range of websites.

How do I know if I'm getting a good deal?

While you identify the type of television service you want, it is just as important to evaluate the cost. Here are some tips to protect yourself from deceptive or misleading offers:

1. Know your provider.

Take time to research the companies that offer service in your area. Both cable and satellite providers may use a third-party seller of service. You may check the Better Business Bureau for a company's reputation.

2. Ask if an independent retailer or "third-party" seller is involved.

Many providers allow a third party to sell contracts for service. A third-party seller could be a door-to-door salesman, an independent retail store, or another kind of company, such as a telephone or utility service provider. This sales link can complicate your service contract if the deal goes bad. For instance, a third-party seller may offer a price that is not honored by the provider. Or your contract may be with a seller who is not accountable to the provider in a dispute. To avoid this difficulty, find out who is responsible for the offers made and make sure it's written in your contract.

3. Get the service plan in writing.

Before you sign up for service, ask for a written copy of the contract and a breakdown of the price. There may be a verbal but not a written contract with a provider, or the television service may be set up by a third-party seller. Be cautious if the provider does not give a written explanation of the plan. Take time to document and keep record of the offers made.

4. Break down the bundle.

Package deals are common between television service providers and phone and Internet companies. Consumers may get a single bill from their phone provider for a bundle plan that includes television. It may appear the agreement is only with the phone company. However, often the television service has additional contract terms and conditions that you need to know. For instance, a satellite provider may offer a price with a rebate, but the bundle plan

may not mention how to get the rebate offered by the satellite provider. Take time to learn what a bundled service plan really requires so that you get the service and price you want.

5. Read your monthly bill.

To ensure that you are paying for only the services contracted, understand how you are billed. Review your monthly bills for consistency with previous bills. If you have concerns, you should contact your service provider immediately.

6. Avoid termination fees.

Many television service plans include a "term commitment," which requires you to keep the service for a set period of time. Ask up front about the length of the contract and early cancellation fees to avoid a large bill from the company when you end service. To collect a termination fee, some companies may try to automatically charge the credit card on file when you end service. If you are charged a termination fee on your credit card without your knowledge or authorization, you should promptly dispute the matter directly with your bank or card issuer as well as with the provider.

What if I have a problem with my television service?

If you have a problem or concern with your television service, act quickly to resolve your issue. Keep records of your efforts, including the time of your calls, the name of your customer service representative, and the action that was taken. If you are unable to resolve your concerns directly with the company, you should consider the following options:

1. Your local franchising authority.

If you have an issue with your cable provider, you may contact your city or local municipality. You should be able to find the contact information for your local municipality on your cable billing statement. It is important that citizens with concerns about their cable television service rates, quality, billing practices, or customer service report their concerns to the local municipality.

2. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC).

Both agencies have some authority to regulate certain aspects of the cable and satellite television business:

Federal Communications Commission

455 12th Street SW
Washington, DC 20554
888-225-5322
www.consumercomplaints.fcc.gov

Federal Trade Commission

Bureau of Competition
600 Pennsylvania Avenue Northwest
Washington, DC 20580
202-236-2882
antitrust@ftc.gov
www.ftc.gov

3. The Better Business Bureau.

The BBB may have complaint information about a television service provider:

Better Business Bureau

220 South River Ridge Circle
Burnsville, MN 55337651-699-1111
800-646-6222
www.bbb.com

4. The Minnesota Attorney General's Office.

If you would like to file a complaint about your television service or you would like more information about this topic, please contact:

Office of Minnesota Attorney General

Lori Swanson

445 Minnesota Street, Suite 1400
St. Paul, MN 55101
651-296-3353 or 800-657-3787
TTY: 651-297-7206 or 800-366-4812
www.ag.state.mn.us

Consumer Check List

Identify service available in your area

- Local Service
- Cable Service
- Satellite Service

Evaluate the costs

- Know your provider
- Get the plan in writing
- Break down the bundle
- Know and review your bills
- Avoid termination fees

Service problems

- Act quickly to resolve
- Keep records of your efforts

If no resolution, contact:

- Local Franchising Authority
- Federal Communications Commission
- Federal Trade Commission
- BBB
- Minnesota Attorney General