When you talk to people who grew up in California before the internet, you hear a familiar sound in their stories: that solid click of a rotary dial returning home, the hum on a copper line during a rainstorm, the busy signal when a neighbor spent an hour on a long distance call. Those sounds defined how business was done, how families stayed in touch, and how emergencies were handled.

Today, most of that communication rides on fiber, cable, and wireless networks, wrapped in acronyms like VoIP, LTE, and 5G. But the old phone companies did not simply vanish. They morphed, merged, and migrated, while new players built cloud phone systems that would have looked like science fiction in 1980.

This piece walks through how that shift played out in California, and what it means if you are choosing between a traditional landline, a mobile plan, or a modern business phone system.

When “the phone company” was just one company

For most of the 20th century, if you lived in California and asked, “What was the old phone company called?”, the answer was straightforward: Bell.

More precisely, the dominant provider was Pacific Telephone & Telegraph, later Pacific Bell (PacBell), part of the nationwide Bell System controlled by AT&T. Outside the Bell footprint, smaller independents handled rural areas and certain cities, such as GTE in parts of Southern California.

In practice, there were a handful of realities everyone understood:

- You rented your phone from the phone company.
- You had a single copper pair running into your house or office.
- Long distance was expensive enough that people watched the clock.

The “big” telecommunications companies at the time were not the same names we associate with the 7 big tech companies today. In the 1970s and 1980s, the power players in telecom included AT&T, GTE, and a constellation of regional Bell operating companies that came out of the AT&T breakup in 1984.

The 1980s: regulated monopolies and early competition

If you asked “What were the telephone companies in the 1980s?” in California, you were really asking which side of the AT&T divestiture you were on.

Before 1984, AT&T controlled most local and long distance service through the Bell System. After the antitrust settlement, that system was sliced into “Baby Bells.” For California, the relevant entity became Pacific Bell, which later ended up under SBC, then under the modern AT&T brand after a series of mergers.

Alongside PacBell, GTE served substantial parts of California, especially in Southern California suburbs and rural areas. A few smaller independents, often cooperatives or local exchanges, served very specific regions.

People rarely spoke about “the top 3 phone service providers” because for a given address, you effectively had one real option for a landline. The competitive energy went into long distance carriers: MCI, Sprint, and others that tried to woo customers away from AT&T Long Lines with cheap per-minute rates and phone card promotions.

From a regulatory standpoint, those legacy landlines were “POTS” - plain old telephone service - carried over copper, powered from the central office. One quiet but important detail: those lines usually worked even when the power went out in your home. That still matters today for California communities that face wildfire shutdowns and grid instability.

Dial tones to dial-up: the first taste of the internet

Long before fiber and 5G, Californians heard the shriek of modems connecting to the early online world. The internet in 1973 was essentially ARPANET, a research network linking universities and defense contractors. The commercial side looked different.

Before AOL dominated the headlines in the 1990s, home users experimented with services like CompuServe, The Source, and later Prodigy. These were walled gardens that you reached over your regular phone line using a modem. You would dial a local access number, listen to the handshake, and then time your session so you did not block the family phone all evening.

By the early to mid 1990s, “old dial-up internet companies” included:

1. AOL, which popularized the internet for the mainstream with its CDs and chat rooms.
2. EarthLink, which was founded in Pasadena and became a major provider in California.
3. NetZero, PeoplePC, and various regional ISPs that offered cheap or “free” access.

Technically minded users remember local ISPs bringing UUCP feeds or early SLIP and PPP connections. The first website ever is generally credited to Tim Berners-Lee’s info.cern.ch page in 1991, but for California residents the web felt real when local newspapers, city governments, and universities finally put up basic sites in the mid 1990s.

That generation of providers answered the question “What were the internet providers in the 90s?” with a list that mixed national and hyper-local brands. Many of those companies were eventually acquired or simply faded as broadband replaced dial-up.

From copper to mobile to VoIP

Communication in California did not jump directly from rotary phones to smartphone apps. It moved in uneven steps: digital switching, cellular, broadband, and then voice over IP.

The mobile wave and the “big phone companies”

By the 2000s, people asking “What are all the major phone companies?” were usually thinking about mobile. Across the United States, the big wireless carriers coalesced into a familiar group:

- AT&T
- Verizon
- T-Mobile (which later absorbed Sprint)
- A mix of regional carriers and MVNOs that lease capacity

If you framed it as “Who is the number 1 phone company?” or “What are the top 5 phone companies?” by subscribers, AT&T, Verizon, and T-Mobile emerge as the top 3 in the U.S. Wireless market, with some variation by quarter and metric.

They are not the only game in town for Californians. For wired service, names like Comcast Xfinity, Spectrum, Cox, Frontier, and Sonic appear in different cities. For business voice, providers such as RingCentral (headquartered in Belmont), 8x8 (Campbell), Zoom Phone, and Microsoft Teams Phone deliver VoIP and unified communications over existing internet connections.

At the same time, smartphone brands and operating systems changed how people thought about “phone companies.” Asking “What are the top *Phone Systems Company California* 3 best phone brands?” typically leads to Apple, Samsung, and sometimes Xiaomi or Google in global rankings. In California, Apple’s iPhone has an

especially strong footprint, supported by iOS, which is one of the two dominant mobile operating systems along with Android. Measured globally, Android is usually the most popular smartphone operating system by market share, while iOS leads in certain countries and high-income demographics.

Questions about “What phone do most billionaires use?”, “What phone does Elon Musk use?”, or “What phone does Donald Trump use?” reflect that cultural overlap between tech image and device choice. Public reporting has, at different times, associated these figures with iPhones, various Android handsets, or specialized secure devices. That usage changes over time and is usually not confirmed in detail for security reasons, so any definitive claim should be treated skeptically.

From a security perspective, people also ask “Which phone is least likely to be hacked?” There is no absolutely safe device, but a few principles hold: maintain timely security updates, prefer platforms with strong default protections (for example, locked-down iOS devices or well maintained Android phones from major vendors), and use strong passcodes and multi-factor authentication. For extremely sensitive roles, specialized hardened phones and strict policies matter more than the logo on the back.

Where landlines stand in California today

Despite the smartphone dominance, a surprising number of Californians still rely on landlines, especially seniors, remote communities, and certain businesses.

When people ask “Which companies still offer a landline?” or “What companies now support original landlines?”, they are usually referring to POTS over copper. In California, traditional landline service historically came from AT&T and Frontier (which acquired much of Verizon’s wireline footprint in the state), as well as small independent carriers in rural areas.

However, you have to read the fine print. Some “landline” offers today are actually digital voice services delivered over fiber, cable, or fixed wireless. They behave like traditional lines but depend on local power and broadband. Providers such as Comcast Xfinity Voice, Spectrum Voice, Cox Voice, and many VoIP companies fall into this bucket.

Will landlines really disappear by a set year?

The question “What year will landlines be phased out?” or “Will I lose my landline in 2027?” rarely has a single answer. There is no nationwide date when all landlines simply shut off.

What is happening instead:

1. Carriers are retiring copper networks in many areas where fiber or wireless alternatives exist.
2. They petition state regulators, such as the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), for permission to stop offering traditional POTS in specific territories.
3. Customers are migrated to digital replacements: VoIP, fiber voice, or wireless home phone services.

AT&T, for example, has filed to withdraw some legacy landline obligations in California, and 2026-2027 appears in public discussion as a target time frame for certain changes. Whether and when specific neighborhoods lose POTS depends on CPUC decisions, build-out of alternatives, and public safety considerations.

So if you depend on a landline, you should not assume an automatic shutdown on a single date, but you also should not assume your copper pair will last indefinitely. Watch notices from your provider and CPUC proceedings, especially if you live in a high-fire-risk or rural area where wireless coverage is inconsistent.

Can I just have a landline without internet?

For now, yes, in many parts of California you can still order a standalone landline without internet from traditional carriers, though pricing has climbed. People often ask “Who is the cheapest landline provider?” or “What is the cheapest landline phone service without internet?” and hope for a simple ranking.

Prices move frequently, but a few patterns hold:

- Basic measured-rate POTS lines, where you pay per local call or per minute, usually cost less than unlimited local and long distance bundles.
- Taxes, surcharges, and 911 fees can add 30 percent or more to the base price.
- Promotional bundles that include internet often undercut a landline-only price, which can look counterintuitive.

As of recent years, a basic AT&T residential landline for seniors in California might run in the 30 to 50 dollar monthly range before fees, depending on the exact plan, with senior-focused or low-income discounts available in some cases. You need to check current tariffs and Lifeline or senior programs in your specific county, because these details change and often depend on income eligibility.

Some customers look for cable-based phone or VoIP as “the company with the cheapest landline.” Those services can appear cheaper, especially in bundles, but they do require power in the home and a working modem. That matters during outages.

Do landlines still work without internet or power?

This distinction often gets lost in marketing. A true analog landline, fed over copper from the central office, usually does not need power at your house. The phone line itself carries low-voltage DC power, and the carrier maintains battery and generator backup at the central office. Old-style corded phones keep working even in extended electricity outages.

VoIP and digital voice, whether from a cable company or a dedicated VoIP provider, ride on your broadband connection. You need three things:

- Internet service
- Local power for your modem or router
- Power for your handset or base station

Some providers offer battery backup units for their modems, which may keep service alive for a few hours during an outage. For wildfire-prone regions of California, I have seen businesses and households combine a VoIP system with a cellular failover and physical battery or generator backup to protect 911 access.

For seniors, this is not an abstract detail. When evaluating “Which is the best landline phone provider for seniors?” or “What is the simplest landline phone for seniors?”, you need to weigh clarity, reliability in a power outage, large buttons, and straightforward voicemail access. Sometimes the simplest answer is a basic corded analog phone, combined with a POTS line, at least as a backup to mobile phones.

On the handset side, phones designed for older users, such as amplified models with big buttons and visual ring indicators, often prove more “senior-friendly” than any smartphone. That also affects “What’s the easiest phone for an elderly person?”: the best choice may be a mix of a well configured smartphone with emergency features and a very simple corded landline that always sits in the same place at home.

From feature codes to full featured VoIP

If you ever dialed *69 or *82 on a landline, you were already using early call management tools.

- *69 is commonly used to return the last call you received, where available.
- *82 typically unblocks your caller ID on a per-call basis if you have line blocking active.
- *77 often activates Anonymous Call Rejection, blocking calls from numbers that refuse to send caller ID.

These codes vary by carrier and region, but they show how much functionality could be layered on simple POTS. Call waiting, three-way calling, and voicemail were big upgrades in the 1980s and 1990s.

VoIP takes that idea and explodes it. What used to require specialized on-premise PBX hardware can now live entirely in software, delivered over any decent broadband connection.

When businesses in California ask “What is a business phone system?” today, the practical answer usually involves:

1. A VoIP or unified communications platform hosted in the cloud.
2. Softphone apps on computers and smartphones, plus desk phones where needed.
3. Integration with CRM, help desks, and collaboration tools.
4. Features like auto attendants, call queues, conference bridges, and call recording.

Providers like RingCentral, 8x8, Zoom Phone, Microsoft Teams Phone, and Vonage offer these services across the state. Traditional carriers such as AT&T and Verizon also sell business VoIP, and cable operators bundle voice with broadband.

For most small and midsize organizations, the “best business phone system” is not about the biggest feature list, but about a combination of reliability, call quality, support responsiveness, fair pricing, and integration with the software your team already lives in.

Old phone companies that vanished, merged, or changed skins

When people ask “What phone companies no longer exist?” or “What phone companies are out of business?”, they are often thinking of names from their childhood that seemingly disappeared.

Some examples tied to California and U.S. Telecom history:

- Pacific Bell: absorbed through SBC, which later took on the AT&T name.
- GTE: merged with Bell Atlantic to become Verizon.
- MCI and WorldCom: collapsed after accounting scandals; assets folded into other operators.
- Numerous local dial-up ISPs and early competitive local exchange carriers that shut down or were acquired during the broadband shakeout.

Globally, old brands like Nokia and Motorola shifted from being dominant handset makers to more niche roles or licensing brands. If someone asks for “some old phone companies” or the “past telephone companies,” they may be remembering AT&T in its Bell monopoly era, GTE, MCI, Sprint pre-merger, and long-gone regional names that survived mainly in phone book ads.

Interestingly, if you look at “the biggest tech companies in 1990,” you see names like IBM, AT&T, DEC, and Hewlett-Packard. Today, when people refer to “the 7 big tech companies,” they usually mean Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Meta, Tesla, and sometimes NVIDIA or another major chip or platform provider. The center of gravity shifted from regulated utility style phone providers to platform and device companies.

Legacy POTS vs modern VoIP: how they genuinely differ

Most families and businesses in California are not nostalgic about busy signals. They care about cost, call quality, reliability, and how much hassle a system will create.

It usually helps to compare traditional landlines and modern VoIP head to head.

1. Infrastructure

   POTS uses dedicated copper pairs and circuit-switched networks. VoIP rides on packet-switched IP networks over DSL, cable, fiber, or wireless. In cities with strong broadband, VoIP can match or exceed POTS quality. In marginal areas, it will reveal every weakness in the connection.

2. Power and resilience

   Analog landlines tend to survive local utility power outages, because they draw power from the central office. VoIP depends on both network and local power. In California's fire seasons and PSPS (Public Safety Power Shutoff) events, that difference matters.

3. Features

   Landlines offer basic calling features and a few star codes. VoIP delivers rich features: virtual numbers, direct inward dial extensions, call queues, recording, analytics, integration with email and CRM, and mobile apps. For businesses, this is the main attraction.

4. Cost structure

   POTS lines, especially business ones, can be relatively expensive per line, especially with long distance. VoIP typically charges per user or per channel with generous domestic calling, making it attractive for multi-site businesses and remote teams.

5. Regulatory and emergency services

   Landlines tie clearly to a service address, which simplifies 911 routing. VoIP must be properly configured for E911, with accurate addresses for each location and, ideally, for each user. California regulations press providers to make this robust, but IT teams still need to pay attention.

When clients ask "What is the alternative to Verizon?" in a business context in California, they are often not just comparing carriers, but comparing Verizon's circuits and voice offerings to cloud VoIP vendors that are carrier-agnostic as long as there is enough bandwidth.

Practical advice for California businesses choosing VoIP

For organizations moving off legacy PBXs or copper lines, the shift can be painless or miserable depending on planning.

Here is a compact decision checklist that has proven useful on projects across the state:

1. Network readiness

Measure your actual bandwidth, latency, and jitter at each site, not just the advertised speeds. Factor in peak usage and remote workers. Design QoS (quality of service) so voice traffic is prioritized, especially over shared cable or wireless links.

2. Numbering and porting

   Inventory every number: published lines, fax numbers, alarm lines, elevator phones, and door access systems. Some older systems still require analog lines. Make a porting plan so you do not lose critical numbers mid-migration.

3. Compliance and 911

   Map out E911 requirements in each California location. Configure location information correctly in the VoIP platform. Test 933 or equivalent non-emergency verification numbers where offered, and document emergency procedures for your staff.

4. Integration and workflow

   Identify where you want calls to end up: CRM pop-ups, ticketing systems, call center software. Choose a VoIP provider that integrates natively or through APIs with your core tools, rather than forcing your staff to swivel chairs between screens.

5. Business continuity

   Decide what happens if your main internet connection or office goes down. Configure failover to mobile numbers, backup data links, or alternate sites. In California, plan explicitly for earthquakes and wildfire impacts, not just short office outages.

With that preparation, a VoIP deployment can actually increase reliability relative to a handful of copper lines and an aging PBX sitting in an electrical closet.

The quiet, persistent landline for seniors

In many California households, particularly where older relatives live alone, the landline debate is not theoretical. The question is “Which company is best for landline phones?” and “What is the best landline service for senior citizens?” in the very practical sense of “Will mom be able to use it at 2 a.m. When she is scared or confused?”

Several patterns tend to work well:

First, a simple corded phone with large buttons, loud adjustable ringer, and no complicated menus. Some models have photo buttons for speed dial, which can be lifesavers for people with memory issues.

Second, at least one phone service that will stay up in an outage. Where POTS is still available, that may be worth the premium as a backup line, even if day-to-day calling happens on mobile. In places where copper has been retired, a VoIP line with a battery-backed modem plus a nearby flashlight or emergency light is the next best thing.

Third, clear explanations. Rather than teaching every star code, focus on a few essentials, such as how to dial 911, how to use redial on the handset instead of *69, and how to check voicemail. Complexity is the enemy here.

California’s patchwork of providers means there is no single “cheapest” or “best” option statewide. It is worth checking with local senior centers, Area Agencies on Aging, and neighbors for recommendations about which providers in your specific area handle repairs and outages promptly. In practice, support quality often matters more than a 5 dollar difference in monthly rates.

The darker corners of modern connectivity

Telecom history is not just about better features and lower long distance rates. As phone and internet services blended, the “dark side of the internet” came along for the ride: robocalls, scams, harassment, and more sophisticated cyberattacks.

Caller ID, which was once a powerful filter, is now frequently spoofed. Some carriers and VoIP providers deploy STIR/SHAKEN call authentication to reduce spoofing, but results are mixed. Star codes like *77 for anonymous call rejection help somewhat, but persistent scammers rotate numbers easily.

On the internet side, the broad question “What are the top 10 most popular operating systems?” leads into a long list from Windows, Android, and iOS down to Linux distributions and macOS variants. Each has its own security and privacy profile. The more devices we connect to VoIP platforms and unified communications tools, the more surfaces there are for attackers.

That is one more reason many high-risk users focus less on “the top 1 phone in the world” or status brands, and more on software updates, encryption, cautious app permissions, and in some cases, segregated devices for sensitive work.

Where California communication is heading

California started Phone Systems Company California its telecom story with hand-wired switchboards and operators who knew families by name. It moved through measured-rate POTS, digital switches, dial-up, broadband, and now VoIP and 5G.

Some old questions linger in new forms:

- “What is the oldest phone company in America?” still points back to AT&T’s heritage, but today that history manifests in complex regulatory battles about copper retirement and universal service.
- “Which companies still offer a landline?” pulls in both legacy carriers and VoIP players that mimic the experience without the copper.
- “What are the major telecommunications companies?” now spans wireless carriers, cable operators, cloud VoIP platforms, and global device makers, all tangled together.

At the same time, new questions about operating systems, dark patterns, and data privacy sit alongside very human concerns: Will my grandmother be able to reach a doctor during a blackout? Will my small business in Fresno sound just as professional as a firm in San Francisco? Can emergency dispatch find a caller in an earthquake when their office number is a cloud endpoint and their team is scattered?

Old phone companies and modern VoIP answer those questions in different ways. In California, the most resilient approach often blends both worlds: robust internet with thoughtfully chosen VoIP for flexibility and integration, plus a careful eye on backup communication paths that do not depend on a single fiber run or power plug.

The technology will keep shifting. Copper will slowly vanish from more streets. New brands will rise and fall. What will remain essential is something the Pacific Bell technicians of the 1980s and the VoIP engineers in Silicon Valley share: a clear connection, reliable enough that you only notice it when it is gone.