

Can You Hear Me Now?

By Dave Russ

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Way back in 1996, Congress passed the Telecommunications Act. This ground breaking piece of legislation was enacted to loosen the death grip that incumbent Bell monopolies held on consumers wallets... as well as foster competition in the long distance and broadband arenas.

In the FCC's own modest declaration... "The Telecommunications Act of 1996 has the potential to change the way we work, live and learn. It will affect telephone service -- local and long distance, cable programming and other video services, broadcast services and services provided to schools."

"Potential" being the key word here.

Oh, it started out well enough... with the usual hype and fanfare associated with the Internet heyday. New players, fueled by the 90s investment frenzy, arose like wildflowers in May... collectively spending billions of dollars on the race to blur the line between the old switched networks and the new IP pipelines.

Breakthrough technologies, such as VOIP (Voice-over-Internet Protocol), threatened to shake the very foundation of the telecommunications world, offering consumers viable new choices. Companies like Net2Phone and Dialpad gave anyone with a computer, microphone and dialup connection, the ability to do an end around the established long distance carriers.

Soon, VOIP went mainstream, finding its way directly to the telephone and bypassing the need for a computer. "Pay by

the month, not by the minute" became the rallying cry of a new generation of long distance marketers... as the concept of flat-rate and "unlimited" long distance blossomed. Consumers and small businesses no longer needed to fear receiving a huge long distance bill come months end... as they stepped off the per-minute treadmill.

And all was well... or so it seemed.

But did these cutting edge Internet technologies forever change the telecom landscape, as promised? Was it time yet for high-fives at the FCC... and was a victory parade in order for consumers?

In a word... No.

Quality and reliability issues, indifferent customer service and unsound business practices... exacerbated by the overall telecom meltdown, wiped out most of these alternate providers... burying them in the dot.com graveyard.

Meanwhile, the Big Three (AT&T, MCI and Sprint) still enjoy the lions share of US long distance revenues.

And has the local market fared much better? Not really. The 1996 Act required the regional Bell incumbents to grant access to their UNE-P (Unbundled Network Element-Platform). But like all good monopolies, the Baby Bells have done everything humanly possible to prevent this access. Just ask Covad, NorthPoint and Rhythms... companies that all had far-reaching aspirations of bringing high speed DSL to everyones doorstep.

So much for competition, right?

Well, dont give up quite yet. There is some good news. Despite the carnage, there has been a survivor or two. Companies that refused to be stonewalled and have remained true to their vision.

One in particular that stands out is a CLEC called Z-Tel Communications (Nasdaq: ZTEL). For the past few years, Z-Tel has valiantly battled the huge Bell monopolies to try and gain entry into the local telephone markets. And believe it or not, theyre succeeding... having quietly acquired over 350,000 paying customers in 47 states.

Even more impressive has been Z-Tels commitment to innovation and value. They recently introduced Z-LineHOME Unlimited™, a bundled package (\$49.99 in most states) of unlimited local calling, unlimited nationwide long distance and popular calling features like Voicemail, Caller ID,

Call Waiting, 3-Way Calling, Find Me and Notify Me.

In addition, Z-Tel is poised to roll out their exclusive Personal Voice Assistant (PVA). The Personal Voice Assistant is a revolutionary step forward in voice activated communications... and will soon be included in the Z-LineHOME Unlimited feature set at no extra charge.

Gregg Smith, president and chief executive officer for Z-Tel, in recent meetings with the FCC and Congressional leaders, stated:

"Due in large part to UNE-P, competition is generating improved services for consumers every day. For example, Z-Tel is actively investing in and developing next-generation dial tone services that we believe will change the way people communicate, like voice recognition technology and personalized online directories. Soon, instead of looking up phone numbers, our subscribers will be able to simply say, call Aunt Tracy on her cell phone and be connected.

And today, for a flat monthly fee, Z-Tel subscribers can call anywhere in the U.S., talk as long as they want and take advantage of advanced services that make their communications more powerful.

These are exactly the kinds of services that the 1996 Act sought to deliver."

Yes they certainly are. What do you know... maybe telecom deregulation is finally working after all.

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Dave Russ, Partner
Unlimited Long Distance 4U
Helping Smart Consumers Save Money
With Unlimited Local Home Phone Service
and Expanding Communication Power with the PVA
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