
Consumer Decision Making Contest

1997-98 Study Guide

PAGERS

As prices fall, more and more people are using pagers as a way to stay in touch with family and friends. Pagers are basically an FM receiver that turns radio signals into numbers and letters. To reach you, the caller dials your pager number, then punches in the number they want displayed on your pager. Within minutes or seconds, the service provider broadcasts the message. Your pager beeps, chirps, or vibrates to let you know you have a message. These numbers and/or letters are displayed on an LCD screen on the pager for you to read.

If you decide you need a pager to keep in touch, you'll find a vast array of choices in both pagers and service. Before obtaining a pager, however, check with local authorities. Many schools have banned pagers from school property because they are disruptive to classes and school activities.

When obtaining a pager, you have a choice between leasing the pager or purchasing it. In addition to the pager, you must purchase 'service.' Most pagers are marketed in a bundle - pager and service combined in a package. Since different service providers use different frequencies, you can't buy a pager from one place and service from another. Pagers are available from a variety of sources including electronic stores, department stores, and service providers.

Where to begin.

It is recommended that you first select a service and then select the pager. There are many more service providers, plans, and price structures than different models of pagers. There are several key questions you need to answer before choosing a service.

- *How many calls will you receive?* Most service contracts include a specific number of pages you can receive in a month - usually 100 - 300. After that, you will be billed for each page you receive. The charge could be ten cents or more per page. Some contracts offer unlimited pages. Alphanumeric pagers - pagers which receive words as well as numbers - have two phone numbers assigned: one for numeric service and the other for text messages. To leave a test message, the caller must speak with an operator. Message pages are counted separately. The number of allowed text messages per month is usually much lower than numeric messages and pages over the limit are more expensive - sometimes 25 or 50 cents per message.

- *What coverage do you need?* Pager service covers a specific geographic area. The least expensive service covers the local area. Find out what the local area is. Some providers include only a specified mileage radius around your community. Once you are outside that range, the pager will not be able to pick up signals. Others provide regional or national coverage. Decide what area of service coverage you need and select a plan that matches your needs.
- *How is the provider's service?* No federal or state agency monitors the quality of service provided by paging companies. Contact your local office of the Better Business Bureau to see if there have been any complaints lodged against a provider. You may also ask if the provider offers a trial period where you can test their service before signing a long term contract.

Examine the contract.

Most service providers offer a variety of plans. It is important to examine the features and requirements of each before you select one and sign on the dotted

line. Choose the contract with features you can live with and that match your needs. Look for:

- *Payment options.* Most companies will offer you a break on monthly service fees if you pay for 6 months or a year in advance. While this could save you a few dollars, make sure you will be using the pager for the full time period. You may also want to ask for a trial period to make sure you are happy with the provider's service before paying that far in advance.
- *Activation fees.* It can cost \$10 - \$20 to set up a pager. Some providers waive this fee.
- *Pager number.* Consider where you live and where your callers will be calling from. Some companies provide a local number as your pager number; others provide a toll-free number and a PIN number. While this doesn't involve a charge to the caller, they have more numbers to key in.
- *Insurance.* Whether you buy or lease a pager, you can buy insurance to cover loss or damage for about \$2 - \$3 a month. This insurance usually covers about half the pager's cost. This insurance is not a necessary for most people.
- *Cancellation fee.* Find out what it will cost you to break your contract if you need to. In addition to a fee, there is usually a 30-day notice of cancellation required.
- *Exchanges.* For people who purchase a pager and are later not happy with the service or the pager, you can sometimes bring it to another provider and trade it in for one of their pagers.

Picking a pager.

Once you have decided on the service you want, you can turn your attention to picking a pager. You can buy or lease a pager. Generally, if you plan to use it for at least a year, it is cheaper to buy than to lease.

There are two types of technology used in pagers. The original, and most common, is known as POCSAG. The newest is called Flex. The Flex system has some advantages over the POCSAG system. Flex pagers use less power so their batteries last longer - 4-5 months vs 1 month for a POCSAG pager. The Flex technology is more flexible than the POCSAG technology so it is more likely to carry new types of service, such as receiving stock quotes and sports scores. Because of this flexibility, the Flex system pagers are more expensive. They are also harder to find because the technology is so new.

Good quality pagers are available using either technology.

Most new pagers use the 900 MHZ frequency. Older pagers may use 150 or 450 MHZ frequency. The 900 MHZ frequency makes it easier for signals to penetrate buildings and increase the likelihood you will receive your messages.

As you examine individual pagers, evaluate them on the following features:

- *Readable display.* Make sure the size of the numbers and letters is adequate for you to read. Ask how many lines are displayed. If you have an alphanumeric pager, it is easier to read messages that have several lines of text displayed at once rather than a single line that scrolls across the screen. A lighted display helps in the dark.
- *Display style.* Is the display at the top of the pager or on the side? How will you be wearing the pager? Is it easy to read the display when it is clipped to your belt or do you have to take it off to read the display?
- *Battery.* Does the pager warn you when the battery is low? This is a must or the battery will die without any warning. It is very desirable to have a pager with a battery backup. This will allow the pager to keep clock settings and stored messages when you change the battery.
- *Out-of-range indicator.* This is helpful to let you know when you are out of the range where you can receive messages.
- *Auto on/off.* This feature lets you program the pager to turn on and off at set times. This saves battery life in case you forget to turn it off at times when you don't need it.
- *Message storage.* How many messages can the pager store? Will it keep you from deleting a message to save a new one when you reach the maximum number of messages you can store?
- *Time and date stamp.* This lets you know when a message came in. Some pagers can also be used like a clock or a timer.
- *Controls.* How easy are the controls to use? Does it have one button that you use for everything or does it have more than one button? Most people may find it convenient to have more than one button but too many buttons can also be a problem.
- *Message alert.* How does the pager alert you that you have a message? If it has more than one

option, you can choose the option that works for you and change it depending on the situation.

Begin your shopping for a pager with local stores and providers. They may be better able to meet your needs than someone located many miles away. Try to determine the bottom line annual cost of your pager including purchase/lease and service so you can compare offers at several locations.

References:

“Beeping in touch.” *Consumer Reports*, August 1996.

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