



Toll-Free vs Local Business Number: How to Choose

Get a business phone number with a simple auto attendant menu from Auto Attendant. A caller picks who they need and the call rings that person's own mobile, so nobody on your team has to publish a personal number.

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In this article

1. [The short answer](#)
 2. [The two kinds of number in one paragraph each](#)
 3. [Start with who calls you, and from where](#)
 4. [What each number signals today](#)
 5. [Cost: who pays, and how](#)
 6. [Texting: check before you print it](#)
 7. [Portability: can you keep the number?](#)
 8. [Getting a toll-free number, and the rules on hoarding](#)
 9. [Canada notes](#)
 10. [Decision table](#)
 11. [Using both without confusing callers](#)
 12. [Checklist before you decide](#)
 13. [FAQ](#)
 14. [Sources](#)
-

The short answer

Most small businesses should start with a local number. Add a toll-free number when a real share of your callers are outside your area, when you sell to a whole country, or when a toll-free number is already printed on things you cannot recall. Many businesses end up with both: a local number for local customers and a toll-free number for everyone else.

This guide is the decision side of the question. For how toll-free numbers are administered, what a RespOrg is and why moving one is different from an ordinary port, read our reference page on [local vs toll-free numbers](#). Rules below are described as of October 2026. This is educational information, not legal advice.

The two kinds of number in one paragraph each

A local number has an area code tied to a place, such as 416 for Toronto or 512 for Austin. Callers pay whatever their own plan charges for calling that area, which today is often nothing extra. The number tells people roughly where you are.

A toll-free number starts with one of seven codes: 800, 888, 877, 866, 855, 844 or 833 ([FCC](#)). The business, not the caller, pays for the call. The codes are not interchangeable: the same seven digits after 800 and after 888 reach two different subscribers ([FCC](#)). A toll-free number says nothing about where you are.

Those seven codes belong to the whole North American Numbering Plan, which includes both the US and Canada. A further code, 822, is reserved for future use ([Somos](#)).

Start with who calls you, and from where

The number is for your callers, so the useful first question is not "which looks better" but "who dials it". Pull the last few months of call logs, or simply list your customers, and sort them into three groups:

1. **Same city or region.** Neighbours, walk-in customers, people who found you on a map.
2. **Elsewhere in the same country.** Mail-order buyers, remote clients, out-of-town patients.
3. **Other country.** Cross-border customers (US callers to a Canadian firm or the reverse) and anyone outside North America.

If group 1 is most of your calls, a local number fits. If groups 2 and 3 are large, toll-free starts to earn its keep. If you have both, run both.

For callers outside North America, a toll-free number is usually the wrong tool. Overseas reach involves separate international numbers and rules; our [international toll-free buyer checklist](#) covers that case.

What each number signals today

"Is a 1-800 number outdated?"

Not outdated, but its original purpose has weakened. The FCC describes toll-free numbers as ones that "can be dialed from landlines with no charge" and that let callers reach businesses "out of the area without being charged a long-distance fee" ([FCC](#)). Fewer callers pay long-distance fees now that many mobile plans bundle national calling, so the saving to the caller is smaller than it was.

What remains is the signal. A toll-free number reads as "this business serves people beyond one town" and, for some buyers, "this is an established company". That is useful for a national e-commerce shop or a software support line. It can work against a two-person plumbing firm, where a local area code says "we are nearby" before anyone speaks.

Mobile callers are not always free

Even on a toll-free call, the FCC notes that wireless callers "will be charged for the airtime minutes used during a toll free call unless they have an 'unlimited calling' plan" ([FCC](#)). So "free to call" is true for landlines and for mobile callers on unlimited plans, but not for every caller. Do not promise "free from any phone" in your ads.

What neither number does

Do not choose either type expecting a search-ranking or call-volume boost; we found no primary source that supports one. Pick the number that truthfully matches where your customers are. Our [area code guide](#) covers choosing a local code, including overlays and businesses that serve several cities.

Cost: who pays, and how

With a local number, the caller's plan covers the call and you pay your provider's line fee plus any inbound usage it charges. With a toll-free number, you pay for the call, usually by the minute. The difference shows up most clearly at providers that list both rates side by side.

As one published example, the US voice pricing page of Twilio, a developer-oriented carrier, listed these pay-as-you-go rates when we checked it on 28 October 2026 (the page says "Pricing current as of August 2026"; amounts in USD) ([Twilio US voice pricing](#)):

Number type	Monthly number fee	Receiving calls
Local number	\$1.15	\$0.0085 per minute
Toll-free number	\$2.15	\$0.0220 per minute

At those rates, 1,000 minutes of incoming calls would cost about \$8.50 in usage on a local number and about \$22 on a toll-free number. That is a wholesale price list for developers, not a quote for a business phone plan, and retail plans package these costs very differently. In Canada, for example, TELUS says its Business Long Distance customers "receive a toll-free number at no additional charge" ([TELUS](#)), with usage billed under the plan.

The pattern to take away is the cost model, not the numbers:

- **Local:** cost is mostly fixed. Busy months do not change the bill much on most flat-rate plans.
- **Toll-free:** cost scales with call minutes. A popular ad, a long hold time or a support problem that triggers many calls all raise the bill.
- **Ask any provider:** the monthly fee per toll-free number, the inbound per-minute rate, whether mobile-originated calls cost more, the minimum billing increment, and whether there is a minimum monthly charge.

Texting: check before you print it

If customers will want to text you, check text support before choosing. The FCC says customers can text toll-free numbers "so long as those numbers are 'text enabled'" ([FCC](#)). In practice there is also a verification step for business messaging. Twilio, for example, states that since 31 January 2024 messages sent from unverified toll-free numbers to the US and Canada are blocked, and that verification review takes "approximately 3-5 business days" ([Twilio Help Center](#)). Other providers run their own processes.

Ask the same question about a local number: texting is a separate capability from voice on either type. If texting matters, confirm in writing that the specific number will be text-enabled, and by when.

Portability: can you keep the number?

Both types are portable, but in different ways, and this matters more than the logo on the business card.

Local numbers are tied to geography. The FCC says that if you are "switching service providers and remaining in the same geographic area, you can keep your existing phone number", but "if you are moving to a new geographic area, you may not be able to keep your current phone number" ([FCC](#)). A shop that moves across town usually keeps its number. A firm that relocates to another city may not.

Toll-free numbers have no geography, so a move across the country does not threaten the number. Instead, the number is a record in a central database (the Service Management System) controlled by a Responsible Organization, or RespOrg, chosen by the subscriber ([47 CFR 52.101](#)). The FCC requires toll-free numbers to be portable: a subscriber can move the number "to a new RespOrg when changing service providers" ([FCC](#)).

Two practical consequences:

- **Know who your RespOrg is.** If a reseller set up your toll-free number, the RespOrg may be the reseller's carrier, not you. Somos, the toll-free database administrator, lets you look up the current RespOrg of a number on its Find a Toll-Free Number page ([Somos Support](#)).
- **Not every provider takes toll-free numbers in.** Check before you sign that the new provider accepts toll-free ports, not only local ones.

Getting a toll-free number, and the rules on hoarding

You get a toll-free number through a RespOrg, also called a Toll-Free Service Provider. Numbers are "reserved on a first-come, first-served basis" ([Somos Support](#)). Under 47 CFR 52.111, the FCC may assign them by competitive bidding, first-come first-served, or another method ([47 CFR 52.111](#)); some 833 numbers were auctioned ([FCC](#)). Somos offers a public search across all seven codes where you type any seven digits or letters ([Somos](#)).

Two FCC rules shape what you can do:

- **Warehousing ([47 CFR 52.105](#)):** a RespOrg must not reserve numbers without an actual subscriber who agrees to be billed for them ([47 CFR 52.105](#)).
- **Hoarding and brokering ([47 CFR 52.107](#)):** a subscriber must not acquire more toll-free numbers than it intends to use, and no one may acquire a toll-free number to sell it for a fee. Routing multiple toll-free numbers to a single subscriber "will create a rebuttable presumption" of hoarding or brokering ([47 CFR 52.107](#)). Numbers assigned by competitive bidding are excepted from both rules.

For a small business this means: take the number you will use, not a stack of near-matches "just in case", and be wary of anyone offering to sell you a specific 800 number outside the auction exception.

Canada notes

- **Same codes.** Canadian toll-free numbers use the same seven codes as the US, because the codes are assigned across the North American Numbering Plan ([Somos](#)). An 888 number does not tell a caller which country you are in.

- **Coverage is a product setting, so ask.** Canadian carriers sell toll-free service with a defined reach. TELUS, for example, describes its service as letting customers call "from anywhere in Canada and the U.S." and offers routing by "the caller's area code" ([TELUS](#)). Ask any provider which provinces, states and countries can dial your number.
- **Portability.** Carriers that port numbers in Canada list toll-free numbers as portable. Twilio's Canada porting guideline, for example, names geographic, mobile and toll-free numbers as portable types and names the CRTC as the regulator ([Twilio Canada porting](#)). That is a carrier's description of its process, not a regulator's rule.
- **Same database, different regulator.** Canadian toll-free numbers sit in the same shared North American toll-free database that Somos administers, and RespOrgs can be based in Canada ([Somos tariff](#), sections 2.1.4 and 2.3.2). The warehousing and hoarding rules cited above, though, are in the US Code of Federal Regulations. Scope limit: we could not load a primary CRTC source on Canadian toll-free rules, so this guide states no Canadian equivalents. A Canadian business should ask its provider which terms apply to its toll-free number.

Decision table

Your situation	Local	Toll-free	Both
Trades, clinic, restaurant, salon: almost all callers nearby	Yes		
Local business, but you advertise in a regional newspaper or radio	Yes		Consider
Online store or software selling across one country		Yes	Consider
Customers in both the US and Canada	Consider	Yes, if it reaches both	Often
You plan to relocate to another city within a few years	Risky to keep	Yes	
Very tight budget, unpredictable call volume	Yes		
A toll-free number is already printed on vehicles, packaging or manuals		Keep it	Often
Customers expect to text you	Yes, if the provider supports texting on it	Only if text-enabled and verified	Check both
Small firm wanting to look larger to business buyers		Consider	Consider
Most callers outside North America		Not enough on its own	See international options

Using both without confusing callers

Running a local and a toll-free number side by side is common, and it can be simple if both lead to the same place.

- **Point both at the same menu or people.** The FCC notes that "calls to each toll free number are routed to a particular local telephone number" (**FCC**). Many businesses route the toll-free number to their main local line so callers get the same greeting either way.
- **Publish by audience.** Local number on your storefront, map listing and local ads; toll-free number on national ads, packaging and the support page.
- **Track which one rings.** Some toll-free services report which toll-free number the caller dialed (**TELUS**). Use that to see whether the toll-free number pays for itself.
- **Do not publish numbers you will not answer.** Every published number is a number you have to keep paying for, keep routing and keep answering.

Checklist before you decide

- ☐ Sorted the last few months of callers into local, same-country and other-country.
- ☐ Estimated monthly inbound minutes, and multiplied by the toll-free per-minute rate you were quoted.
- ☐ Asked the toll-free provider: monthly fee, inbound per-minute rate, mobile-originated rate, billing increment, minimum charge.
- ☐ Confirmed which countries, provinces and states can dial the toll-free number.
- ☐ Decided whether you need texting, and confirmed text-enablement and verification in writing.
- ☐ Recorded who the RespOrg is for any toll-free number, and saved the account details.
- ☐ Checked that your current and any future provider accepts the number type for porting in.
- ☐ If keeping a local number, checked it stays portable if you move (same geographic area).
- ☐ Taken only the numbers you will actually use (no "just in case" stack).
- ☐ Updated your website, map listing and printed material to show the right number to the right audience.

If you are still choosing a provider, our guide on [how to get a business phone number](#) walks through the steps.

FAQ

Is a 1-800 number outdated?

No. It still signals national reach and still saves money for callers whose plans bill long distance. What changed is that many callers no longer pay for long-distance calls, so for a purely local business the local area code is often the stronger signal.

Do mobile callers pay to call a toll-free number?

Sometimes. In the US the FCC says wireless callers are charged airtime for toll-free calls unless they have an unlimited calling plan. Mobile plan terms in Canada vary by carrier, so check before claiming "free from any phone".

Can I keep my toll-free number if I switch providers?

Yes, toll-free numbers are portable in the US by FCC rule: you move the number to a new RespOrg. Find out who controls the record now, and confirm that the new provider accepts toll-free ports.

Can I text a toll-free number?

Only if the number is text-enabled, and for business messaging most providers also require a verification step before messages go through.

Can I buy a good 800 number from someone who owns it?

Generally no. FCC rules prohibit acquiring a toll-free number to sell it for a fee (brokering), with an exception for numbers assigned by competitive bidding. Search availability through Somos or a RespOrg instead.

Auto Attendant gives a US or Canadian business a number with a keypad menu, and that number can be local or toll-free: you can search for a toll-free number when you pick your line, at the same \$29 USD per line per month. An existing toll-free number can also be ported in, with our team handling that move manually.

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Source links

Links cited in this article, in order of first appearance. Full addresses are provided for readers using extracted text.

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THE PUBLISHER

About Auto Attendant

Auto Attendant gives a small business one phone number and a recorded menu that sends each caller to the right person. The call rings the mobile that person already carries, using their normal dialler and their normal mobile plan. Pricing is a single flat monthly fee for the whole company rather than a charge for each user, and there is no app, desk phone or hardware to install.

One number, one menu, the phones you already own

A caller dials the business number, hears a short greeting and chooses an option. Each option can ring one mobile, ring several at once so whoever is free answers first, or try people one after another in a set order. There is no limit on how many people sit on the receiving end, because nobody is billed per seat. Setup is done by the owner in a few minutes: pick a number, write the greeting, and point each option at a mobile.

What it deliberately is not

An auto attendant routes a call; it does not answer one. Nobody at Auto Attendant speaks to callers, and no AI stands in for a receptionist. A business that wants its calls handled, messages taken and appointments booked wants an answering service, which is a different product at a different price. A business that needs call recording, queues, agent dashboards or CRM integration wants a contact centre platform. Auto Attendant is for the case where the call should simply reach the right pocket.

Keeping personal numbers off the internet

The business number is the only number a caller ever sees. Personal mobile numbers are never displayed and never given out, which is what lets an owner put a number on a website, an invoice, a van or a Google Business Profile without handing a personal line to everyone who finds it. An existing advertised number can be ported across and kept, and the old line keeps working while the port is in progress.

Work with Auto Attendant

Visit [Auto Attendant](#) to see [how it works](#), [how it compares](#) to a personal mobile, Google Voice and a full phone platform, and the current [pricing](#).

Telephone number portability, emergency calling and caller-ID rules differ by country and change over time. Articles published here describe general practice and cite primary regulator and carrier sources; they are not a guarantee of any timeline, and they are not legal or regulatory advice for a specific business.

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