



## Mayor John Marks: Phones bridging digital divide

JOHN MARKS • MY VIEW • SEPTEMBER 10, 2009

Today's smart phones are changing the way we use our wireless devices. With the introduction of each new device, more exciting and useful features emerge.

On today's phones, consumers can take pictures, send e-mail, edit work documents, view maps and listen to music. All of these functions mark a radical departure from the cell phones that were first introduced solely to make calls.

But today's wireless devices are also serving a critically important function. For some Americans, their phones are their first exposure to next-generation broadband technology. A recent study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that one out of three Americans have used their mobile device to access the Internet. African-Americans and Hispanics are at the forefront of this trend: 48 percent of African-Americans and 47 percent of English-speaking Hispanics have used their mobile devices to access the Internet, far greater than the average among all adults. With such a significant percentage of the population relying on their mobile devices to use the Internet, wireless devices are helping to bridge the digital divide.

Why are these groups bypassing more traditional wire-line technologies to get online? Because their cell phones are easy to use and more affordable than ever. The FCC's 2009 Wireless Competition Report found that the average cost per minute of cell phone use has decreased by four cents since 2000. At an average cost of six cents per minute, this is significantly less expensive than rates in Western Europe. It is therefore no surprise that American consumers use their cell phones more than their European counterparts.

As a result of more affordable prices, as well as the adoption of consumer-focused policies such as improved call quality and prorated early termination fees, consumers are more satisfied with their devices than ever before. The American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) found that 68 percent of wireless users were satisfied with their devices in the first quarter of 2009.

These figures illustrate a market that is competitive and clearly serving consumers. As 95 percent of consumers have a choice between at least three wireless providers and 60 percent have a choice of five, wireless carriers must work to attract and retain customers. Wireless providers know that their customers can switch providers if they are not satisfied, so they are constantly working to reduce prices, introduce new innovations and improve service quality.

With the frequent debuts of innovative new devices, wireless carriers must always work to stay one step ahead.

Consumers are benefiting from the competition among wireless carriers that leads to greater innovation, affordability and wider accessibility to broadband. In this market, consumers are winning. As the Obama administration and Congress have stressed the importance of universal broadband access, policymakers should take note of this new on-ramp to the Internet and consumers' current satisfaction.