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VIEW

Posted May 30, 2004

**Kristin Brantmeier column:
Personal budget cuts lead to
disconnect**

Two months ago, in a budget-reducing frenzy, I cut off my cable TV service and got rid of my home phone.

I went cold turkey on the cable. No support groups, no weaning myself slowly by first downgrading to basic cable. I went from 60 clear, crisp channels to three fuzzy ones.

Initially, I doubted my ability to enjoy living in an environment devoid of MTV, CNN, TLC and the rest.

The reality is that living "off the grid" has some advantages.

Without cable, I no longer sit on my couch for hours, flipping through TV channels, putting off my to-do list. Channel surfing holds little appeal, since going through all my channels takes maybe 15 seconds.

Since most of the shows I used to watch are on cable, my overall TV-viewing time has plummeted. With my TV options limited, I'm forced to find other things to do.

My house is cleaner, and my laundry pile is less obnoxious. Hobbies get more attention. I read more, and my e-mail correspondence is up-to-date.

Who knew I had so much free time? Or, more accurately, who knew I used to spend so much time watching TV?

Though I moved myself backward 25 years by ditching cable, I simultaneously joined the forward-thinkers who use only a cell phone. At first, I missed my home phone, even though I never used it. There's just something comforting about picking up a handset from its cradle and hearing a dial tone, anytime.

I soon realized the benefits of going strictly cellular. Without a home phone, telemarketers can't bother me. I don't have to worry about the answering machine tape running out, or wonder if I've missed an important call when I'm not home. People can reach me anytime, anywhere (which can also be a negative, but that's another column).

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My no-cable, cell-phone-only lifestyle isn't perfect. The biggest disadvantage of no cable is lousy TV reception. I can't get NBC at all, although I can usually wrangle my rabbit ears to get the other networks. I fiddle with antenna length, position, rotation ... even my body stance. My attempts to get reception have resulted in comedic displays of "antenna gymnastics," as one amused guest (who has cable) commented.

Using only a cell phone presents some unique challenges as well. After I made the switch, my first cell phone bill roughly equaled my car payment. Stunned, I quickly educated myself on "peak" vs. "off-peak" minutes, and my bills dropped.

Between minute limits, dropped calls and low batteries, there's some inconvenience to depending entirely on my cell phone. Plus, cell phones are easy to misplace. Losing track of a cell phone is always a pain, but when it's your only phone, it's downright traumatic.

Recently, my sister visited my house. She left wearing my jacket by mistake. No big deal, except that my cell phone was in the pocket. Since she had my only phone, I couldn't call her to tell her to bring it back. I felt completely helpless, standing in own living room without any means to contact the outside world (short of going outside and yelling in the streets, of course).

Given all the plusses and minuses of living without cable and a home phone, I can't recommend that everyone disconnect (I'm sure the cable and phone companies are relieved). But for me, the \$1,000 in yearly savings is well worth the few hassles.

Now, if only I could figure out a way to use my cell phone to get perfect TV reception.

Kristin Brantmeier is an Appleton resident and Post-Crescent community columnist. She can be reached by e-mail at pletters@postcrescent.com

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