



YMax magicJack

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BOTTOM LINE:

So simple it's almost perfect, the magicJack is the best home voice-over-IP gadget I've seen to date. Excellent call quality, a workable set of calling features, and an amazing price make this little box the VoIP wonder to beat.

PROS:

Nice price. Good set of calling features. Softphone capability included. Simple enough to be idiot-proof.

CONS: Only one line (and phone number) per magicJack for now. No Linux drivers.

COMPANY: Ymax Corp.

Price: \$39.95 Direct

Service Provider: Other

Mac Compatible: Yes

Type: Requires PC

Number of AC adapters for system: 0

Number of additional handsets system can support: 0

Color screen: No

Vista Compatibility: Windows Vista Capable

EDITOR RATING: ●●●●○

By Oliver Rist

Those commercials advertising cheap voice-over-IP phone rates look appealing, but there's always some fine print: You have to switch cable-TV providers, install a VoIP-smart Internet router, or something. And you end up ticked once a month when the bill from MCI, Verizon, or some other telecom robber baron dips into your wallet. If this sounds like your bio, the YMax magicJack is for you: 2 minutes of setup, voice quality that's almost indistinguishable from a straight analog POTS line, and a cost of just under \$20 a year for unlimited nationwide service. When I was testing it in December 2007, the service offered phone numbers in about 90 percent of the country. International calling wasn't available at test time, though it should be in the next few months. Pricing will be determined based upon phone rates at that time, though YMax says its mandate is to make international calling cheaper than any rate you can get with either Skype or Vonage.

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The magicJack device, about the size of a box of Tic Tacs, has a USB plug on one end and an RJ-11 phone jack on the other. I had to connect mine to a Windows PC, but Mac OS X drivers should be ready soon. After USB plug meets USB port, you'll wait a minute or so while the magicJack software gets automatically loaded. Those who already have magicJack will be happy to know that the company says a firmware rev released while I was testing makes the hardware more resilient to problems caused by fluctuating electrical levels in foreign countries. It also installs hardware echo control, which taxes your CPU about 50 percent less than before.

If this is your first time using the device, you'll have to run through a registration process. You either request a new number or ask to have your existing number ported (porting availability depends on where you are, takes up to 60 days, and has a \$10 surcharge attached); then you input the information necessary to make e911 work (so that emergency services know where you're calling from). The process should force you off the couch for 60 seconds or so, but that's it: no phone configuration, no Internet router tweaks. Low-tech folks who just want a cheap phone can just plug a regular analog phone into the magicJack's RJ-11 port and start dialing.

Those who want a little more will find a fairly impressive array of features in the magicJack software, including caller ID, call waiting, call forwarding, and voice mail that will respond even if you're not online. The software supplies a softphone that works through a headset and microphone connected to your PC. Compared with business VoIP, this might be a light feature set, but for home users it's plenty.

Your PC plays a significant part in the service—as in no calls without one. That made me balk at first, thinking that a PC had to be on constantly to make this work. But while technically that's true, the magicJack's ability to pick up voice mail even while you're offline means that your PC can be off while you're at work or away, since you wouldn't be there to answer phone calls anyway. And, as with any VoIP service, magicJack doesn't care where you're connecting to the Internet as long as the service is broadband. So if your software is installed on a notebook, you can take your home phone with you. And YMax says that in the near future a firmware upgrade will use remote wake-up (a feature that most motherboards support these days) to power up your PC when a call comes in.

MagicJack's call quality is amazing—almost too good to be true. YMax reps say they can deliver such great sound because they built the operation as a straight phone company rather than an Internet voice provider. YMax worked to become the only such company certified in all 50 states, which, its reps claim, allows it more gateways linking the Internet and the telcos than any other voice provider has. That means it maintains control of calls much longer than a regular VoIP provider, which in turn translates into high call quality. I have no way of verifying the company's infrastructure claims, but the voice quality speaks for itself.

What worried me is that this network sounds expensive, yet YMax is charging so little. That's how SunRocket got killed. Then again, magicJack customer base was growing at 30 percent a week while the product was still in beta, according to the company, so maybe I'm worried about nothing. And after all, should the service go belly up, you still have alternatives: It's not as if the telecom robber barons will disappear. **Bottom line: The magicJack is the coolest little home VoIP gadget I've seen to date, and for less than \$40, everybody should try it.**