

Making The Call

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I'm sure there has to be rules about this already floating around somewhere but since I've never come across any and I'm too cheap to buy any new books I'm going to make some up. The "this" I am referring to is, basically, the phone. For years I've let my runners run around with their portable phones, and for years I've been letting them make calls on said portable phones without really putting any thought into exactly how this works. They've sure as hell have never paid a phone bill (not that I ever sent them one) and have never been cut off from service or had any troubles receiving calls and for the most part their phone life has been pretty cushy. This has to stop.

So, in the interest of making the world of Shadowrun a more complicated place to live in I've written up a few ideas regarding the phone oriented world. I use the word "phone" as a catch all phrase incorporating traditional hand set models, vid phones, and those funky combination trideo-vid phone systems. Portable phones are anything that you can move around, be they hand held, vehicle based, wrist worn, etc.

Normal Phones

A normal phone is the kind you'd find sitting in the kitchen, living room, and bedroom of Bill and Martha Corp. A runner would probably never own one of these. As far as I'm concerned the days of billing by mail are over and done. In the 2050s if somebody possesses a home phone they sign up with a provider of some kind, and give them enough cred info so the company can direct bill them for charges. Since an individual must have some kind of account from which they can be billed they need a SIN number for identification.

Pay Phones

Unless the runner is an idiot, they're using a certified credstick to make pay phone calls. Then again, most runners don't use anything but certified cred. When a decker jacks in through a pay terminal (like the pretty one on the cover of the rule book) they're basically doing the same thing. Hotel phones also have a credstick port and operate the same way as normal pay phones.

Portable Phones

When you start playing around with portable phones things get easier and harder at the same time. Virtually all of the legitimate portable phones in my gaming world use satellites to relay their signals. We're not too far from such technology today and I think they would have mastered it by 2050, plus it makes the game so much easier and explains the 1000ny price tag. With this system an individual can take their phone anywhere in the world and use it without a problem. Such phones send their signals directly to a satellite which then either sends it directly to another portable phone or to a relay station which vents it elsewhere. The phone also sends along an identification code so the everybody knows who to bill. When somebody purchases the phone in the traditional way and signs up with a provider of some kind they provide proof of identification (in the form of a SINED credstick) and the fees for phone use are withdrawn directly from the user's account. Since it is rare that a runner has in his or her possession a SINED stick they have to come up with an alternative. I've come up with three:

Pre-Paid Phone Service

The way this works is you buy your phone, find a provider, and pre pay them for a set amount of service.

This payment may come from a certified cred stick. From then on the individual may make as many calls as they want to until their money runs out. They can then pay more to the same provider, or pick up a new one (a smart runner would), and may still use the same phone. Losing a pre paid phone is sort of like losing a certified cred stick. If you leave it at the bar somebody can simply pick it up and dial their mom. Unlike normal phones, which allow you to essentially "cancel" it by providing proof (in the form of your SINed credstick) to your provider, pre-paid providers already have your money and you have no proof that you are who you say you are. In other words, don't leave it at the bar.

Cloning

The act of obtaining somebody's phone identification number and programming it into another phone is known as cloning. It happens a lot even now. The provider's satellite doesn't know who's holding the phone, or even what kind of phone is being held, all it has to go on is the number. Most phones include some kind of identification number encryption (not to be confused with the scrambling of the actual call) and this level of encryption usually parallels the level of encryption that the provider is able to decode. Hence, a rating 9 phone won't mean much if the provider can only accept up to rating 4.

It usually doesn't take long for a provider to figure out that a phone has been cloned. Either it will receive two calls using the same number at once, will sense abnormal patterns, or any number of other quirks which give away the fact that something is wrong. The provider's response varies. Most pre-paid providers will ignore the knowledge because with two phones dialing in the customer's money runs out twice as fast. Normal "SINed" phone providers will generally attempt to contact the phone's owner or, if things get really out of hand, suspend service. The more expensive the service, the more thorough the response. Whole Earth Communications, the highest costing provider on the market, will issue a security response if they locate the violator, a response involving helicopters with large guns.

Pirate Portables

If you want to make a call, but don't feel like setting foot in a mall, then a pirate portable is probably the way to go. Pirate portables use a twisted network of matrix, satellite, radio, and microwave transitions, set up and established by communication pirates, to bounce their signal from place to place, sometimes even getting it to where it needs to go. The cost of a pirate portable fluctuates a lot depending on who you talk to, payment usually being new yen but which may be services or assistance and so on. A runner may even wish to participate in the pirate network by voluntarily setting up a relay station, or getting rid of a jammer. It's a lot like Shadowland.

Other Stuff About Phone Calls

Encryption

It takes a lot to successfully encrypt a call in the 2050s. Modern computers don't take long to break the encryption and thus it takes a lot of new yen to set up a system small enough to fit in a portable yet complicated enough to resist descrambling. As far as prices go for such measures I usually relate the cost to the Crypto systems found in the Street Samurai Catalog, but reduce the cost. Restricted Access Systems Some phone systems will not accept calls from anyone who isn't using a normal (SINed) credstick. Also, some of these systems will not accept calls unless the caller possesses a cred stick which identifies them as an individual who has been permitted access.

There is some reasoning behind this. When a decker attempts to enter a system they have a chance to

fight their way in. Hell, a successful sleazeing may have been the decker tricking the IC into thinking he was a legitimate phone signal. Unfortunately phone calls can't do the same thing. If a call is "invalid" it simply isn't allowed to enter, there is no way to "fight" the security measures. A decker from the inside, however, can change system records and access privileges (if they can find them and get to them) so the system, and therefore its security measures, view a call as being valid. The caller may also attempt to get a hold of a list of access codes and manufacture a credstick with these codes on it. But we all know how expensive things get when you start playing around with fake credsticks.