(Approx. 1108 words)

Google Fi – Short for Fidelity, maybe a country code for Finland, or a new network?

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All are correct, but it is the new service that Google is making available that is the real news. At the last meeting where I had a chance to ask, “how many have a smartphone,” there was a resounding show of hands that indicated almost 100 % of the attendees had one. (There were actually a few “flip phone” hold outs.) Although this was a “technically inclined” group of people, it is still amazing since the smartphone was only invented in 2007. In just 11 years the smartphone has had an enormous market penetration. Actually the statistics show that 95% of all Americans own a cell phone and that 77% of all Americans own a smartphone. That’s around 250 million people in the US using smartphones.

The smartphone is the device that we come in contact with and are most familiar with, but it is the underlying network that the smartphone uses that allows it to connect to all the people and servers that we want to contact. Yes, we use the smartphone to contact people by voice, video and texts, but we also contact and communicate with servers like Google, Yahoo, Facebook, Amazon, Wikipedia, Alexa, Twitter, CNN, SunTrust, etc. to do our bidding. None of this contact would be possible without the network that connects these servers to our clients (smartphones, tablets, and computers).That’s right, our smartphones are the clients in the Client-Server arrangement that makes our phone so useful. (If you had attended one of my internet related classes you would have known that.) So, without the network, our clients would not be able to contact the servers and the servers would just be left idle. But there is a network; in fact there are 4 major networks in the United States that offer nationwide wireless services: AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, and Verizon. (Listed alphabetically, not by size or customer service quality or any other quality.) US Cellular also provides regional wireless services, but not quite nationwide.

And now Google is proposing another network service. No, it’s is not going out and building cell phone towers; it is putting together the already available cell phone tower networks from some of the other network operators and making them available through a service called Google Fi. Google Fi will provide your phone the best of any of the three networks, Sprint, T-Mobile, or U.S. Cellular, by intelligently switching to the best network at that time and location. (Notice the two missing providers.) And it will use Wi-Fi to make calls and send texts whenever it can, thus possibly saving data. And when it connects via Wi-Fi, it automatically employs a Virtual Private Network (VPN) which encrypts all of the communications to keep them safe. They say that calls and texts work on Wi-Fi just as they do when you’re using mobile data, and you can continue your phone call as your phone switches between the networks. To do all this magic, Google Fi uses a special Subscriber Identity Module (SIM) card. A SIM card usually identifies the phone (device) to the network. This special SIM card can identify your device to all three networks, T-Mobile, Sprint, and U.S. Cellular. And the really neat feature is that it can switch between the networks on-the-fly, based on many factors. You can order a free SIM card during the sign-up process or you can purchase one at an authorized retailer. SIM cards are now available at Best Buy and online from their website. The SIM card costs $10, but it comes with a $10 account that essentially makes it free.

Not all phones can be used on Google Fi, only unlocked phones can be used with the service. Recall that a locked phone can only be used on one specific network. (If you purchased your phone through Google Fi or the Google Store, your device is unlocked.) So, the phone you use must be unlocked. If you aren’t sure if your phone is unlocked, you can contact your current network or the place where you purchased your phone. Also, you need to make sure you don’t owe any payments on your device. All Android phones must be using Android 7.0 as a minimum and have LTE bands 2 and 4 (again, the place you bought your phone could probably help you with this.) The Samsung Galaxy 6, 7, 8, and 9, as well as the Motorola G5, 6, and Z 2 & 3 will probably work. And all iOS models must run iOS 11 or higher. The Apple 5, 6, 7, 8 and X should also be ok. (Phones that have been designed specifically for Fi, like the Pixel 2 or 3, sold by Google, will probably give you the best experience.)

The cost for the Google Fi service is not cheap but its billing is fairly straightforward. You pay $20 per month for unlimited talk minutes and texts, and a flat rate of $10 per gigabyte of data used (in .1gigabyte increments) until you get to 6 Gigabytes ($60) for the month. At that point you enter the “Bill Protection” level and effectively you have an unlimited plan for the rest of that month. That way you can use as much data as you need for the month without paying over $80 total ($20 base + $60 data). Most of us would probably never get to the Bill Protection level, but if you did by accident you would be protected with this maximum expense cap. (There is another change at 15GB but most of us will probably never reach this.) With this type of billing, you don’t have to pay for an “unlimited” plan every month, but you have one for any month when it may be required. This may be interesting for frequent travelers because the Bill Protection applies to international data usage as well as data usage at home. You can also set up a Group Plan for up to six people to share a single account. With the Group Plan, each additional person is $5 less for the base plan charge, or only $15 per month. Billing is handled by the account owner who is charged for the total bill, though it can be set up for each individual Group member.

So now you can get your network service through Google Fi, which tries to give you the best experience from three networks, instead of your smartphone being married to one specific network as most phones are.