

Testing, Testing: T-Mobile's Mid-Size Market Weak Spot

Ben Munson

On nearly a monthly basis, a post will pop up on the Madison, WI sub-Reddit asking about T-Mobile's coverage in the city and surrounding areas. Unlike AT&T, Verizon and U.S. Cellular—whom, for better or for worse, people in Madison already know very well—T-Mobile is still a bit of a wild card here.

In Madison, T-Mobile has yet to [give rise to any official branded locations](#) [1]. Would-be Magenta-heads can set up service through a handful of retail partners or the occasional prepaid mobile spots found in strip malls. But there's something about a dedicated presence that inspires piece of mind for consumers, especially for us salt-of-the-earth types here in fly-over country. The customer service wait in a brick-and-mortar location is likely just as long as online or over the phone, but at least in person, customers can make sure their disapproving glares will be seen.

T-Mobile says it has nationwide LTE coverage, but at last count that translates to [209 million people covered in 273 metro markets](#) [2]. That's more than two-thirds of the U.S. population but it still seems like the fastest and more reliable T-Mobile coverage is within the major markets. That's why it was encouraging to see some fairly decent results from T-Mobile's network in our area.

I got a chance to test out T-Mobile's coverage in Madison and the surrounding areas with a pair of devices: the LG G Flex and the Sony Xperia Z1S.

Over the course of minimal drive testing, T-Mobile turned up LTE averaging 7 Mbps downlink speeds on the Beltline—a stretch of highway that helps connect Madison's east and west sides. But in Fitchburg—a small suburb just outside of Madison—LTE speeds picked up considerably, hitting close to 13 Mbps. Down the road in the more rural surroundings near Oregon, WI, coverage fell back to HSPA+ but still saw downlink speeds of around 11 Mbps, although uplink was practically non-existent.

On the Capitol Square downtown, LTE coverage fell away but speed tests still showed 6 Mbps downlink—hardly awesome but still enough to accomplish most tasks on a mobile device.

In-building coverage was not as reliable as what I get with my current carrier but it seems that T-Mobile is lining itself up a decent remedy for that. In the first quarter of 2014, T-Mobile should complete its multi-billion dollar deal with Verizon that will give it more of the low-band spectrum (700 MHz in this transaction) it needs to break through the walls. The FCC auctioning off 600 MHz spectrum to the likes of T-Mobile will help, too. That vaunted four-carrier competitive market beloved by regulators doesn't mean much unless all those options show up on your city's coverage map.

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The entrenched incumbent carriers in Madison will hold onto our market for the immediate future. But if T-Mobile can boost its presence and continue to extend its LTE network to provide meaningful coverage outside of major markets, it will present a viable option for wireless consumers in cities like Madison.

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