

PERSONAL BUSINESS

PERSONAL BUSINESS; Those Black Holes in Your Mobile Phone Service

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WHEN Andrea Levy signed up for cellular telephone service, she thought she was getting seamless coverage for the entire country. But Ms. Levy, a marketing executive from Manhattan, complains about being cut off intermittently everywhere from Westchester County to New Mexico, and she sometimes finds unexpected roaming and long-distance charges on her monthly bill.

Stewart Cheifet, an independent video producer from Mountain View, Calif., also laments about coast-to-coast disruptions. "I can drive around the San Francisco Bay area and lose service," he said. In New York, he added, "I couldn't get a signal from a skyscraper on Wall Street." He said that he, too, had encountered unexpected charges.

As cell phone use mushrooms -- there are an estimated 107 million users in the United States, up from 28 million just five years ago -- so has the number of consumer complaints.

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Roderick Porter, the acting chief of the Federal Communications Commission's consumer information bureau, says his department often hears complaints like those of Ms. Levy and Mr. Cheifet. And Lou Richman, the finance editor at Consumer Reports magazine, says he is swamped with reader letters about poor service or confusing billing. "There's overloaded, congested networks, dropped calls and holes in coverage that are all sources of aggravation for consumers," Mr. Richman said.

Most of the problems reflect an industry that is still in flux. The networks and infrastructure of the wireless service providers, analysts say, cannot fully support the vast and rapidly increasing number of customers. A cell phone customer, they say, should understand that he cannot simply buy a phone, sign a service contract and expect the phone to offer the same service as a traditional phone mounted on the kitchen wall.

But consumers can take steps to find the kind of services that best meet their needs. First, experts say, they should understand something about the technology and how it works -- or doesn't -- with various carrier service plans.

Many users, for example, may not know the difference between a digital and analog phone. (The analog system, which is being phased out, breaks conversation into sound waves that are carried over radio signals. The newer digital method, which provides clearer calls with greater security, breaks a voice message into a binary computer code and sends it in short bursts.) And consumers also may not understand what is meant by "anytime minutes" -- basically, no restrictions for calling times.

Consumers may complain about costly roaming fees, which wireless providers charge when customers use their phones outside their service area. They may not realize that their phones may be set on "roam" even when they are not traveling outside their service area. To save money, they can simply shut off the roaming feature, said Scott Relf, a senior vice president for marketing and product development for Sprint PCS, based in Kansas City, Mo. And because of technological incompatibilities, he added, different carriers' equipment may not be interchangeable.

Consumers should also check the fine print of the plans -- and there are many from which to choose. For example, CellularOne in Boston -- soon to be absorbed into Cingular Wireless -- offers 13 plans, ranging from \$19.99 a month for a basic analog plan to \$174 a month for a digital plan that offers 2,500 "anytime" minutes.

The costs depend on several factors, including whether the customer has signed up for local or national service, or has opted for "bundling of minutes," a combination of the two.

Another catch phrase is "buckets of minutes." "Some providers will offer you so many minutes per dollar amount, whether that's local or long distance, whether you're at home or whether you're traveling," said Chris Pearson, executive vice president of the Universal Wireless Communications Consortium, an international group based in Bellevue, Wash., that is working on standardizing incompatible cell phone technologies. "Others will offer you 200 minutes, for example, but only for calls at certain times, on certain days or in your home area."

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Mr. Richman of Consumer Reports said users should understand what they're getting into. Buckets of minutes "can be consumed far more quickly than you realize," he said, because billing policies count partial minutes as full ones, meaning that a 30-minute allotment can be used up in as little as 15 minutes.

To decide how much time to buy, consumers may want to keep a log of all calls they make over a week or two, he added.

Consumers should also ask about late fees and read the fine print on promotions.

Then there is the issue of coverage. Most companies offer some form of local service with national service sometimes bundled in. But the advertisements promising no roaming or long-distance charges for the whole country can be confusing -- as both Ms. Levy and Mr. Cheifet have found.

Ms. Levy, 37, a vice president for research at Shepardson Stern & Kaminsky, a New York advertising agency, chose Sprint last year, primarily because it did not require a long-term contract. Although she signed up for the basic \$29.99 monthly package for 180 minutes, and has supplemented that with an additional \$10 a month for 200 nighttime and weekend minutes, she has incurred about \$50 in unexpected roaming or long-distance charges. Ms. Levy says that for as much as she is resigned to the fact that coverage is flawed, she expects future improvements.

Mr. Cheifet, 61, who relies on his cell phone to keep abreast of business while meeting with clients around the country, first signed up with AT&T at \$89.95 a month for 1,000 minutes. "The company was great and the bill was consistent, but the coverage was lousy," he said, referring to problems with dropped calls or dead zones. He said he switched to Sprint but eventually dropped that plan because of billing problems -- instead of the \$75 a month he had expected, he was repeatedly billed \$140 a month "even though I never went over my 600-minute maximum."

Thomas Murphy, a Sprint spokesman, said he could not comment directly on the complaints of Ms. Levy and Mr. Cheifet because he was unfamiliar with their service plans. He said there could have been errors in their bills, or they may have misunderstood their coverage plans. Reception or service problems could reflect a number of factors, including weather or clogged networks, Mr. Murphy and representatives of other providers said.

Annabel Dodd, author of "The Essential Guide to Telecommunications" (Prentice-Hall) said that service "isn't perfect yet nationwide" but that she was optimistic that mergers like the one recently approved between SBC Wireless and Bell South Cellular to create Cingular Wireless would lead to truly seamless service nationwide.

Industry experts say no single provider can yet cover the entire country. Those who advertise seamless service are doing so by creating alliances with other providers, Mr. Pearson said. When customers move into an alliance partner's network, he said, they may sometimes pay roaming charges.

To help avoid them, Mr. Pearson advises consumers to request network maps so they can track -- on any given trip -- whether they will be in or out of their provider's network. But they should make sure they have the latest maps, he said, because coverage keeps changing.

The major companies are rapidly expanding their coverage zones by combining operations through mergers, building coverage alliances and establishing additional cell phone transmission sites. But Michael Althschul, vice president and general counsel for the Cellular Telecommunications Industry Association, a trade group based in Washington, said providers as diverse as AT&T and Verizon Wireless were hampered by the lack of available spectrum, or frequency bands. To expand, he said, the industry has been negotiating with the F.C.C. to obtain additional frequencies.

WILLIAM CLIFT, chief technical officer for Cingular Wireless, said his company has had difficulty expanding networks in dense markets like New York City.

"When demand for wireless service outpaces a forecast, it can take six months to a year for

Kenneth Woo, a spokesman for AT&T Wireless in Redmond, Wash., said that "people want service, but you can't imagine the protests we get because neighborhoods don't want cell phone transmission sites." Moreover, he said, "cellular is not a perfect technology."

Equipment, of course, is another variable in reception, service and cost. Expect to spend more, for example, for Web-enabled phones. "Newer is actually better," Mr. Pearson said, but there are still many users with old-fashioned analog phones trying to complete calls in areas where their equipment cannot pick up frequencies. Even dual-band or dual-mode phones, which can distinguish between different frequencies and various cell phone technologies, will not guarantee coverage from one carrier to another, he said.

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