

New Wireless Plans Could Mean Billing Nightmare for Customers

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While competition, especially on price, is undoubtedly a good thing for wireless customers, it could mean major problems when it comes to billing, at least initially.

Let's be honest, try as they might, the wireless carriers are failing miserably at creating simple, easy-to-understand plans. Throw in taxes and those notorious "administrative fees" and your wireless bill is likely anything but simple and quite a bit more than that neat little number you see when you're in the store, selecting your new phone.

I recently switched from a legacy family plan over to AT&T's new 10 GB Mobile Share Value plan and let me tell you, my 11-page bill looks like something out of calculus textbook.

When I called up customer service, all I had to say was that I was having some problems understanding my bill, and an exuberant customer service agent name Carl assured me that he'd been dealing with calls like mine all day, and he could most definitely help explain my bill. While I didn't actually ask Carl what led to so many calls similar to mine, I'm guessing it was the fact that this is the first billing cycle since AT&T launched its new 10 GB plan.

After asking me to follow along, which was next to impossible, Carl took me through a dizzying explanation of a slew of prorated charges generated by my switch from one plan to another in the middle of a billing cycle. After at least a half hour on the phone with Carl and numerous drawn-out silences as he checked with a manager on various issues, he was able to deduct \$70 worth of erroneous charges from my tab. That's right, \$70!

What has stuck with me since my chat with Carl is how many people didn't make the call I made? How many people went ahead and paid those extra charges? While I've been generally pleased with AT&T customer service over the years, the second I change anything on my plan, things get wonky. I've added two lines recently and upgraded two devices and I've been on the phone with AT&T's customer service four times to deal with problems on my bill and each time, the company has credited my account.

I'm guessing customers on other carriers are dealing with similar frustrations, and to be sure, there are growing pains whenever large corporations make major shifts in their products or billing systems. Take U.S. Cellular, which attributed higher than normal fourth-quarter churn to problems implementing a new billing system.

Unlimited plans were perhaps the easiest of all offerings from carriers, but

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prevailing opinion seems to be that those are unsustainable. Still, there has to be a better way. A bill for a service just does not need to be this complicated, unless of course all this confusion is by design.

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