July 30, 2009, 12:27 pm

‘Take Back the Beep’ Campaign

Update | 11:17 p.m. AT&T’s Mark Seigel has asked that complaint messages be sent to a different e-mail address, provided below.

Update | 7:50 p.m. Will England of Sprint says the company has now created a brand-new customer forum dedicated to this topic.

Update | 5:19 p.m. T-Mobile had deleted hundreds of complaints on this topic from its forum, and even blocked any new messages containing the word “beep.” But it has now created a new forum just for complaints on this topic, linked below.

Over the past week, in The New York Times and on my blog, I’ve been ranting about one particularly blatant money-grab by American cellphone carriers: the mandatory 15-second voicemail instructions.

Suppose you call my cell to leave me a message. First you hear my own voice: “Hi, it’s David Pogue. Leave a message, and I’ll get back to you” – and THEN you hear a 15-second canned carrier message.

* Sprint: “[Phone number] is not available right now. Please leave a detailed message after the tone. When you have finished recording, you may hang up, or press pound for more options.”

* Verizon: “At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, you may hang up, or press 1 for more options. To leave a callback number, press 5. (Beep)”

* AT&T: “To page this person, press five now. At the tone, please record your message. When you are finished, you may hang up, or press one for more options.”

* T-Mobile: “Record your message after the tone. To send a numeric page, press five. When you are finished recording, hang up, or for delivery options, press pound.”

(You hear a similar message when you call in to hear your own messages. “You. Have. 15. Messages. To listen to your messages, press 1.” WHY ELSE WOULD I BE CALLING?)
I, the voicemailbox owner, cannot turn off this additional greeting message. You, the caller, can bypass it, but only if you know the secret keypress — and it’s different for each carrier. So you’d have to know which cellphone carrier I use, and that of every person you’ll ever call; in other words, this trick is no solution.

[UPDATE: Apple iPhone owners don't hear these instructions — Apple insisted that AT&T remove them. And Sprint already DOES let you turn off the instructions message, although it's a buried, multi-step procedure, which you can read in the comments below.]

These messages are outrageous for two reasons. First, they waste your time. Good heavens: it’s 2009. WE KNOW WHAT TO DO AT THE BEEP.

Do we really need to be told to hang up when we’re finished!? Would anyone, ever, want to “send a numeric page?” Who still carries a pager, for heaven’s sake? Or what about “leave a callback number?” We can SEE the callback number right on our phones!

Second, we’re PAYING for these messages. These little 15-second waits add up – bigtime. If Verizon’s 70 million customers leave or check messages twice a weekday, Verizon rakes in about $620 million a year. That’s your money. And your time: three hours of your time a year, just sitting there listening to the same message over and over again every year.

In 2007, I spoke at an international cellular conference in Italy. The big buzzword was ARPU – Average Revenue Per User. The seminars all had titles like, “Maximizing ARPU In a Digital Age.” And yes, several attendees (cell executives) admitted to me, point-blank, that the voicemail instructions exist primarily to make you use up airtime, thereby maximizing ARPU.

Right now, the carriers continue to enjoy their billion-dollar scam only because we’re not organized enough to do anything about it. But it doesn’t have to be this way. You don’t have to sit there, waiting to leave your message, listening to a speech recorded by a third-grade teacher on Ambien.

Let’s push back, and hard. We want those time-wasting, money-leaking messages eliminated, or at least made optional.

I asked my Twitter followers for help coming up with a war cry, a slogan, to identify this campaign. They came up with some good ones:

“Where’s the Beep?”

“Let it Beep”

“We Know. Let’s Go.”

“Lose the Wait”
“My Voicemail, My Recording”

“Hell, no, we won’t hold!”

My favorite, though, is the one that sounds like a call to action: “Take Back the Beep.”

And here’s how we’re going to do it.

We’re going to descend, en masse, on our carriers. Send them a complaint, politely but firmly. Together, we’ll send them a LOT of complaints.

If enough of us make our unhappiness known, I’ll bet they’ll change.

I’ve told each of the four major carriers that they’ll be hearing from us. They’ve told us where to send the messages:


* AT&T: Send e-mail to: customerissues@attnews.us.


Three of the four carriers are just directing us to their general Web forums. Smells like a cop-out, I know.

Yet all four carriers promise that they’ll read and consider our posts. And we have two things going for us.

First, I have a feeling that the volume of complaints will be too big for them to ignore. To that end, I hope you’ll pass these instructions along, blog them, Twitter them, and spread the word. (Gizmodo, Engadget, Consumerist and others have agreed to help out.) And I hope you’ll take the time to complain yourself. Do it now, before you forget.

Second, we’ll all be watching. I’ll be reporting on the carriers’ responses. If they ignore us, we’ll shame them. If they respond, we’ll celebrate them.

Either way, it’s time to rise up. It’s time for this crass, time-wasting money-grab to end for good.

[466 comments]
Pogue wrote a series of posts documenting the progress of his "Take Back the Beep" campaign. These are listed for reference only and are not part of the prize submission.

Some E-Books Are More Equal Than Others

EDITOR’S NOTE | 8:41 p.m. The Times published an article explaining that the Orwell books were unauthorized editions that Amazon removed from its Kindle store. However, Amazon said it would not automatically remove purchased copies of Kindle books if a similar situation arose in the future.

This morning, hundreds of Amazon Kindle owners awoke to discover that books by a certain famous author had mysteriously disappeared from their e-book readers. These were books that they had bought and paid for — thought they owned.

But no, apparently the publisher changed its mind about offering an electronic edition, and apparently Amazon, whose business lives and dies by publisher happiness, caved. It electronically deleted all books by this author from people’s Kindles and credited their accounts for the price.

This is ugly for all kinds of reasons. Amazon says that this sort of thing is “rare,” but that it can happen at all is unsettling; we’ve been taught to believe that e-books are, you know, just like books, only better. Already, we’ve learned that they’re not really like books, in that once we’re finished reading them, we can’t resell or even donate them. But now we learn that all sales may not even be final.

As one of my readers noted, it’s like Barnes & Noble sneaking into our homes in the middle of the night, taking some books that we’ve been reading off our nightstands, and leaving us a check on the coffee table.

You want to know the best part? The juicy, plump, dripping irony?

The author who was the victim of this Big Brotherish plot was none other than George Orwell. And the books were “1984” and “Animal Farm.”

Scary.
November 12, 2009, 12:29 pm

**Verizon: How Much Do You Charge Now?**

Starting next week, Verizon will double the early-termination fee for smartphones. That is, if you get a BlackBerry, Android or similar phone from Verizon, and you decide to switch phones before your two-year contract is up, you’ll be socked with a $350 penalty (it used to be $175).

This fee drops slowly over time ($10 a month), but after two years, it’s still $110. If the premise of the early-termination fee is to help Verizon recoup its original cost of the phone (see my analysis here [http://bit.ly/pOkXz](http://bit.ly/pOkXz)), shouldn’t the fee go down to zero at the end of your contract?

This move doesn’t help Verizon’s reputation for steep pricing and aggressive gouging.

What bothers me more, though, is another bit of greedy nastiness that readers both inside and outside Verizon have noticed.

Here’s one example, from a Verizon customer:

“David, I read your posts about how the cell carriers are eating up our airtime with those 15-second ‘To page this person, press 5’ instructions, but I think Verizon has a bigger scam going on: charging for bogus data downloads.

“Virtually every bill I get has a couple of erroneous data charges at $1.99 each—yet we download no data.

“Here’s how it works. They configure the phones to have multiple easily hit keystrokes to launch ‘Get it now’ or ‘Mobile Web’—usually a single key like an arrow key. Often we have no idea what key we hit, but up pops one of these screens. The instant you call the function, they charge you the data fee. We cancel these unintended requests as fast as we can hit the End key, but it doesn’t matter; they’ve told me that ANY data—even one kilobyte—is billed as 1MB. The damage is done.

“Imagine: if my one account has 1 to 3 bogus $1.99 charges per month for data that I don’t download, how much are they making from their 87 million other customers? Not a bad scheme. All by simply writing your billing algorithm to bill a full MB when even a few bits have moved.”
As it turns out, my correspondent is quite correct. My last couple of Verizon phones did indeed have non-reprogrammable, dedicated keys for those ridiculously overpriced “Get it now”-type services that I would never use in a million years.

At about the same time, I got a note from a reader who says he actually works at Verizon, and he’s annoyed enough about the practice to blow the whistle:

“The phone is designed in such a way that you can almost never avoid getting $1.99 charge on the bill. Around the OK button on a typical flip phone are the up, down, left, right arrows. If you open the flip and accidentally press the up arrow key, you see that the phone starts to connect to the web. So you hit END right away. Well, too late. You will be charged $1.99 for that 0.02 kilobytes of data. NOT COOL. I’ve had phones for years, and I sometimes do that mistake to this day, as I’m sure you have. Legal, yes; ethical, NO.

“Every month, the 87 million customers will accidentally hit that key a few times a month! That’s over $300 million per month in data revenue off a simple mistake!

“Our marketing, billing, and technical departments are all aware of this. But they have failed to do anything about it—and why? Because if you get 87 million customers to pay $1.99, why stop this revenue? Customer Service might credit you if you call and complain, but this practice is just not right.

“Now, you can ask to have this feature blocked. But even then, if you one of those buttons by accident, your phone transmits data; you get a message that you cannot use the service because it’s blocked—BUT you just used 0.06 kilobytes of data to get that message, so you are now charged $1.99 again!

“They have started training us reps that too many data blocks are being put on accounts now; they’re actually making us take classes called Alternatives to Data Blocks. They do not want all the blocks, because 40% of Verizon’s revenue now comes from data use. I just know there are millions of people out there that don’t even notice this $1.99 on the bill.”

Well.

Look, it’s very simple.

The more Verizon gouges, the worse it looks. Every single day, I get e-mail from people saying they’re switching at the first opportunity, or would if they could. In time, the only people who will stay with Verizon are people who have no coverage with any other carrier.

Every company’s dream, right? A base of miserable customers who stick with you only because they have no choice.
I realize that it’s a business, that Verizon exists to make money. But the part I don’t get is, why doesn’t Verizon calculate the business cost of making customers unhappy? Surely some accountant can show that customer anger over these fees and dirty button tricks translate into negative corporate image, and therefore lost business.

Why wouldn’t it be a hugely profitable move to start pitching yourself as the GOOD cell company, the one that actually LIKES its customers?

Here are four baby steps: (1) Let us bypass the 15 seconds of pointless voice mail instructions (Verizon is the only carrier that never responded to my campaign; see http://bit.ly/n1gE2).

(2) Make your early-termination fee reflect your actual cost, rather than being a profit center in its own right.

(3) If a data connection is obviously an error—under 10 seconds, say—don’t bill for it.

(4) And for heaven’s sake, quit imposing your own profit-center buttons on our cellphone designs. If we want to go online for $2 a megabyte, we’ll find a way.

(UPDATE: A reader notes that his AT&T phone has exactly the same buttons and he gets charged exactly the same $2 for an accidental press. The $350 termination fee is a Verizon-only element, but the $2 accidental-data charges may actually be industry-wide. Readers: Can you confirm that it’s the same deal on Sprint and T-Mobile?)

[482 comments]