

Report helps consumers make the right call on plans

Northwest Herald - January 31, 2006

The Citizens Utility Board wants to help cell-phone users select the right calling plan.

The Chicago-based statewide utility watchdog organization recently unveiled "The Cell Phone Shopper's Guide" aimed at helping consumers "sort through all the confusing terms and offers when shopping for cell-phone service."

The guide walks customers through the process of choosing the right cell-phone plan by addressing issues such as the difference between prepaid and standard monthly billing plans, the pros and cons of dropping a land-line phone, and the importance of trial periods to test the reliability of a phone and a calling plan, the board said in a statement.

"Consumers need straightforward, sound information in order to make the right choices," Citizens Utility Board Executive David Kolata said in the statement. "Otherwise, it's buyers beware."

"Consumers need to understand what their options are in order to determine what they need."

"This publication helps fill that information gap and allows them to make good choices."

Some area cell-phone users think the guide is helpful.

Between her job, her family, and a never-ending to-do list, Connie Edgeton has little time to study the pack of cell-phone service providers and their dozens of plans.

"It's very labor-intensive to do all the research," said Edgeton, a Crystal Lake resident, whose family uses Verizon Wireless. "You worry about friends and family [plans] and minutes and everything else. I think a shopper's guide would really simplify things."

Jerry Buszek of McHenry said the guide was a helpful starting point.

"It's going to help more than it hurts," said Buszek, who uses U.S. Cellular.

But Buszek said the guide would not solve everything. His phone's service sometimes roams at home while his bill for text messages does not always add up, he said.

"Every time they try to make it seem like it's your fault," he said. "It's like, what's one customer?"

A couple of larger cell-phone companies with a major presence in McHenry and Kane counties said the guide was good for consumers.

"We have a very thorough process to help ensure our salespeople cover all the essential information with customers at the point of sale," said Carolyn Schamberger, a spokeswoman for Bedminster, N.J.-based Verizon Wireless. "Any tool that serves to help consumers make a more educated decision when purchasing a wireless phone and service is a good thing.

"I think it is very helpful," said Kevin Casey, director of sales for Chicago-based U.S. Cellular Corp. "There are so many options, customers can become confused. It makes a lot of good points. It did a good job comparing all the carriers and their costs."

Arianne Venuso, public and community relations manager for Reston, Va.-based SprintNextel Corp., said the company supports such consumer-education programs.

However, not all cell-phone users think the guide is necessary.

"Everybody at the Crystal Lake Verizon Wireless store is so unbelievably helpful," said Bernard Bartoli of Woodstock, a Verizon Wireless customer. "They work with me to come up with the right plan. They spent so many hours with me after I switched my service to Verizon Wireless from Cingular Wireless."

While acknowledging the benefits of the guide, Casey said U.S. Cellular aimed to give its potential customers and enough information to make a "clear choice" between cell-phone companies.

"Whether in our advertisements or point of sale in the store, we want to make sure we are making it very clear what the rate plan is going to include and what it does not include," he said. "If there is another option that meets a customer's needs better, we move them in the

direction to find a plan that fits their lifestyle, where, when, and how much they use the phone."

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