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CUB gives consumers all the credit

(<http://www.southtownstar.com/business/767076,013008cubcolumn.article>)

January 30, 2008

By David Kolata

A lot of people have the same reaction when I tell them they shouldn't be paying more than \$25 a month for phone service: How can that be?

Easy. Sign up for one of the low-cost Consumer's Choice local-calling plans designed by the Citizens Utility Board and combine that with cheap long-distance rates. That could save the average Illinois consumer nearly \$300 a year.

Now those savings could be even bigger, thanks to a CUB-negotiated \$20 credit attached to one of the best long-distance plans we've ever seen: Pioneer's "Rate Buster."

Most long-distance companies have high rates and slap you with a monthly fee, even if you don't make a single call. For example, AT&T's "One Rate" charges \$2.99 a month and a whopping 10 cents for every minute you talk.

Meanwhile, Pioneer's rate is just 2 to 3 cents per minute. Its 99-cent monthly fee only applies if you want a paper bill (as opposed to an online bill) - and then only in months you make less than \$15 worth of long-distance calls.

Just how much can you save on a low-cost plan like Pioneer? Let's say you make 60 minutes of long-distance calls a month. Throughout a year, AT&T's "One Rate" would set you back more than \$107. Pioneer's plan would cost just \$34, at most - for a full year of long-distance service. Add the CUB-negotiated \$20 credit, and you pay just \$14.

Of course, Pioneer isn't the only good deal out there. ECG and AireSpring Global Fibernet, for example, also charge 4 cents a minute or less. But Pioneer's good deal is made even better with the \$20 credit.

For the past year, CUB's ongoing analysis of the long-distance market consistently proved that Pioneer was the best deal for most callers. When the Portland, Maine-based company discovered that our analysis led to new Illinois customers, Pioneer notified CUB that we were eligible for compensation.

Seeing a golden opportunity, we said "no thanks," but asked if Illinois consumers could get the money instead. The resulting \$20 credit translates into more than 11 hours of free long-distance calls - enough to cover several months, even a year, of bills.

To get the credit, Illinois consumers who want to sign up for Pioneer should call 1-877-492-6878 and just ask for the CUB discount. For information on how to cut your local bill as well, call CUB's Phone Savings Center, at 1-866-688-4282.

In a phone market littered with rip-offs, CUB was happy to find such a good deal - with a \$20 credit. But we won't pat ourselves on the backs too hard. After all, we never would have been able to negotiate the Pioneer offer without the bargaining power of all the consumers behind us. You deserve all the credit, and that's why we gave it to you - literally.

Citizens Utility Board executive director David Kolata writes a column each month. To reach CUB, call (800) 669-5556 or e-mail info@citizens.utilityboard.org.

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