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Slicing through cell phone confusion

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By David Kolata, Guest columnist

It's a common question at CUB phone bill clinics across Illinois. We save people hundreds of dollars a year on their landline phones, but inevitably at least one weary consumer asks: What the heck can you do about my cell phone bill?

Introducing the CUB Cellphone Saver (www.CUBCellphoneSaver.com).

Our new, state-of-the-art online tool automatically analyzes individual wireless bills. So far, it's showing users how to save about \$280 a year, on average - good news for consumers beaten about by skyrocketing energy prices and a sour economy.

In four steps, the CUB Cellphone Saver allows residential customers of the five major wireless companies - AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, U.S. Cellular and Verizon - to upload an online copy of their bill for a full analysis. In a matter of seconds, a report shows the cheapest plans offered by those carriers, including your own, given the cell phone usage reflected on your bill.

If you're already on your carrier's cheapest plan or you just don't want to pay the painful exit fee to switch to another carrier, the tool also will spot billing errors and try to find other ways to cut your current bill. Maybe you're paying for a service, such as insurance or "roadside assistance," you just don't need. Maybe you're paying for directory assistance when you could use free 411. The Cellphone Saver will tell you.

But before you leap to our latest money-saving tool, remember, you must have online billing with one of the five biggest carriers. The CUB Cellphone Saver also doesn't cover prepaid and business plans, or AT&T bills that combine wireless and landline service. Also, the tool won't be ready to analyze old Nextel bills until later in September.

The CUB Cellphone Saver uses software created by a Texas-based company called Validas Inc. CUB has yet to find another online tool that so skillfully juggles the hundreds of offerings among the top five cell phone carriers and cuts through the confusion to give people solid, money-saving tips. One user called it "almost magical."

It may be "almost magical," but the CUB Cellphone Saver is still a work in progress. No tool could be 100 percent perfect in analyzing the wildly complicated cell phone industry.

That's why we ask all users to send us their thoughts and questions through the CUB Cellphone Saver's "comments" page. That way we can constantly make the tool better. Also, if we help you save money, please share some of those savings with us, so we can continue to offer and improve the CUB Cellphone Saver.

Finally, we have a tool that might just bring a smile to the faces of those weary, wireless-bill-clutching consumers who want to know "what the heck" they can do about their cell-phone bills.

Citizens Utility Board executive director David Kolata writes a column each month.

To reach CUB, call (800) 669-5556 or e-mail to info@citizensutilityboard.org.

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