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Cell shocked

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By David Kolata

What do Illinois cell phone bills and watching paint dry have in common?

They both waste a lot of time - more than seven hours, to be exact - according to a new report by the Citizens Utility Board.

CUB's report, "Surviving the Cell Phone Jungle," found that Illinois cell phone bills were burdened with useless services and an average of seven hours and 19 minutes of wasted calling time. The good news is callers could save an average of $331 a year on their bloated bills. Apply those savings statewide, and that's a potential economic boost of $728 million a year.

The report is based on statistics from nearly 7,000 cell phone bills analyzed by CUB's free online tool, the Cellphone Saver (at www.citizensutilityboard.org), which identified potential savings in 73 percent of those bills.

What makes CUB's report unique is that it's based on data that, until now, has been collected only by the cell phone industry, and it exposes a fear-based marketing strategy that the wireless companies have perfected. Many of us are so afraid of paying huge "overage" charges that we've been lured into calling plans clogged with unused calling time that do nothing but drain our checking accounts.

However, overage penalties hit only about 9 percent of the bills analyzed. Among the 5,129 bills in which the CUB Cellphone Saver identified potential savings, the tool pointed to bigger problems:

• While circumstances for individual callers vary, in a majority of bills consumers paid for an average of seven hours and 19 minutes of calling time that never got used. That's about how long it takes for fresh paint to dry, and longer than it takes to fly from Chicago to Iceland. A large number of bills also were plagued with an average of 386 wasted text messages.

• More than half had potentially useless services, such as insurance, directory assistance and even "roadside assistance," for an average of $10.64 per bill. Insurance, at about $5 a month, is often so limited it's useless. The same goes for directory assistance. Why pay up to $2 a call for 411, when numbers like 1-800-FREE-411 and 1-800-INFO-FAST can get you the same service for free?

• CUB's report also revealed how wireless companies nickel and dime their customers, showing that 13.4 percent of total costs - more than government taxes - were comprised of miscellaneous carrier fees. Some appeared to have no other purpose than to fatten profits.

But don't despair. If you're a customer of one of the nation's top five wireless carriers - AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, U.S. Cellular, and Verizon - give the CUB Cellphone Saver a try. Just upload an online copy of your bill and within seconds it will search for less expensive calling plans with fewer minutes and text messages. It also will weed out potentially useless services.

No doubt, many of us are overpaying on our wireless service, but there are ways out of "cell hell," and CUB can help you find the exit sign.

REACHING CUB

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

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