

CUB program aims to lower cell bills

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Created 11/21/2010 - 8:00am

Sun, 11/21/2010 - 8:00am | [Christine Des Garennes](#) [1]  [2]

Want to keep more of your money in your wallet?

A representative of the Citizens Utility Board visited Champaign last week to promote Cellphone Saver, its online bill analyzer that it says can help consumers save hundreds of dollars annually on their cell phone bills.

The consumer group recently issued a report that advises customers on ways they "can dodge the wireless industry's pitfalls."

Citizens Utility Board and Validas, a Houston technology company, analyzed 4,400 wireless bills and found Illinois residents were overpaying by as much as \$906 million a year. In Champaign, cell phone users could be overpaying \$14 million a year, or more than \$359 per person, according to the report.

CUB analyst Bryan McDaniel reviewed five different ways consumers pay too much: wasted minutes, billing errors, insurance, directory assistance and roadside assistance.

If you have one phone line and are using fewer than 300 minutes a month, CUB recommends going with a pre-paid cell phone.

The group also recommends that people pay close attention to their bills, because accidental billing errors can occur as well as cramming, which are fees intentionally added to the bill. Make sure you're not being charged for supposedly "free" nights and weekend minutes, he said.

Insurance coverage, which can cost an average of \$66 a year, according to CUB, is often not worth it unless you have a high-end phone.

And as for directory assistance, over 1,000 Cellphone Saver users paid almost \$3,000 on

directory assistance fees per month. Instead, the group recommended consumers call one of the free numbers available, such as (800) INFO-FAST or (800) FREE-411. You may have to listen to an advertisement, but the service is free, he said.

Some customers may have signed up for roadside assistance through their cell phone carriers, but already have that coverage through another insurance provider or motor club.

The Cellphone Saver can be accessed online [3]. Wireless customers will need to download a copy of their online bill to the site. Those who don't have Internet access at home can fax their bill to the Citizens Utility Board at (312) 263-4329, and an analyst will review it and recommend ways to save.

"We strongly believe customers need more options, deserve rewards, and if they go over their minutes, have the option of adding on another 100 minutes," McDaniel said.

CTIA-The Wireless Association encourages consumers to contact their carriers so they can make sure they're on the most efficient plan, said K. Dane Snowden, vice president, external and state affairs for the industry group in an e-mailed response to The News-Gazette.

"Carriers are more than happy to work with their customers to ensure they are on the 'right' cell phone plan (including SMS, data and voice). This means not only when they sign up for a plan, but also throughout their contract. Or, if staying within a certain limit is a necessity, consumers may want to look at prepaid options," Snowden said.

The CTIA's website [4] has a number of tips and tools for consumers, including how to check their usage, he said. The industry is competitive, and if a consumer doesn't like something about one provider, there are many others to choose from.

"In fact, about 66 million Americans, or nearly 25 percent of all wireless consumers, took advantage of these competitive choices and changed carriers last year so they could get the newest innovative products and services and competitive rate plans," according to Snowden.

The Citizens Utility Board can be reached at (800) 669-5556 or online [5].

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