



CUBFacts

A Caller's Rules to Live By

Beware flat-rate plans. Too many people pay too much money for packages that offer unlimited local and long-distance calls—as well as a long list of features, such as call waiting and call forwarding. In order to save money on a typical plan like this, you would have to make several hundred local calls and/or several hours of long-distance calls each month—and use all the calling features. Maybe you signed up for such a plan because it was bundled with reduced rates for Internet or cable TV. Always check to see if there are other options that could save you even more, such as:

- your phone company's standard per-call rates;
- a lower priced flat-rate plan;
- ditching your landline and relying on cellphone service. (Just make sure your cell service is good at home.)

If you're on an AT&T Consumer's Choice local-calling plan, created by CUB, stay with that good deal as long as you can. Due to changes in the state Telecommunications Act, those plans are now offered only to families who qualify for low-income assistance. Customers already on those plans will be able to stay on them at least until July 2017, when the Telecom Act is up for review again.

Shop for cheap long distance. Beware of high rates (7 cents a minute on up) for calls beyond 15 miles from home. There are a lot of long-distance plans that have bargain rates. For example, Pioneer offers long-distance rates of just a few cents per minute, and a \$10 "CUB credit" to start. (New Pioneer customers have to pay for service automatically through their credit card for at least six months.) Remember to always read the fine print of any offer to spot hidden fees and key details. If you make very few of these calls, consider dropping long distance and using a prepaid calling card or your cellphone.

Use your cellphone as a money-saving friend. Consider dropping the long-distance plan on your landline and using your cellphone for calls beyond 15 miles from home. Similarly, if your wireless plan comes with voice mail, don't pay for the same service on your landline. You can always drop your landline service altogether. Cellphones aren't always as reliable as landline phones. If your cell battery is dead and your home loses power, you can't make a call. Plus, in an emergency, authorities may not be able to locate your exact location when calling from a cellphone, as they do

when receiving landline calls. Still, if it will cut your overall costs and you have consistently good wireless service at home, consider making the move.

Eliminate unnecessary services. Inside Wire Maintenance (called Line-Backer by AT&T) is an optional landline insurance plan, for up to \$10 per month, that covers repairs to your home's INSIDE wires. However, most landline problems are not caused by the inside wiring. You're better off skipping such plans. Also, look for any extraneous charges on your cellphone bill. Do you actually need insurance? The coverage can be so limited that it's not worth the monthly fee. Sometimes fees are added to your bill by a third party without your approval—a scam called "cramming." Call your phone company to get more details on any extra charges you find.

Use free directory assistance. The trade-off is you may have to listen to an advertisement before you get the number. Still, you avoid fees of up to \$2 per call for traditional "information." Next time you need a phone number, try dialing this free service: 1-800-FREE411 (1-800-373-3411).

Cut down on data. The biggest money-waster on wireless plans is data. Set your smartphone to use Wi-Fi whenever it's available—including your home, if you pay for Wi-Fi, and places that offer free Wi-Fi. This cuts down on your data usage and could allow you to downsize to a cheaper plan. (Just don't do banking or other financial transactions on public WiFi, because the network may not be protected.) Also, beware of data-devouring apps or features—like Facebook, Twitter and weather updates—that may continue to run on your phone long after you need them. Make sure they're turned off when you're not using them. Similarly, avoid ad-supported games. Every banner or ad that appears on the screen chips away at your data.

Consider prepaid. Prepaid cellphones are an alternative to pricey, 2-year contracts, and they don't slap you with exit and overage fees. Such plans used to be geared more for consumers who just wanted an emergency phone, without a lot of minutes. However, there are now prepaid plans geared for consumers with greater calling and data needs.

Check with CUB! See CUB's Telecom page, at CitizensUtilityBoard.org, for more tips. If you have any questions about your telephone, natural gas, or electric service, call CUB's toll-free Consumer Hotline, at 1-800-669-5556.