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wireless technology

12 Things You Must Know About Number Portability.

On November 24, the FCC is mandating that consumers be allowed the option to retain their phone numbers when switching service providers. For anybody who's stuck with one carrier solely because they wanted to hang on to their number, this is a big deal--the chains have come off. But unfortunately, you can't simply take your number and run. There are a lot of unanswered questions and potential pitfalls ahead. So before making the switch, arm yourself with the facts, and be wary of hidden costs. These tips will help you steer clear of any unexpected fees and problems.

1. Number portability will not be universally available on November 24.

Initially, it will be available to users in the top 100 markets. Depending on where you live, you may have to wait as long as six months to take advantage of this ruling. For Hawaii, Nextel has stated that number portability becomes available to ONLY Oahu customers on November 24. Neighbor island customers will get portability in early 2004. Call your desired carrier for more information regarding Hawaii availability.

2. Don't expect to use the same phone when switching carriers.

As you're probably aware, phones in the United States work on specific networks (GSM, TDMA, CDMA, and AMPS). Thus, you won't be able to use a phone that works on one network--CDMA, for example--with a phone that works on another, such as GSM. In the case where carriers use the same network technology, they tend to support only the handsets that have been fully tested on their own networks. This means that if you're trying to move from Sprint to Verizon--both of which use CDMA networks--the new network might not support your phone.

3. Contracts still exist and are expensive to break.

Changing carriers doesn't nullify an existing contract. If you want to break a contract that hasn't expired, expect to pay fees as high as \$200 to get out of the deal. Also, you'll be accountable for any outstanding bills.

4. Additional fees may apply.

Even if you can get out of an existing contract or no longer have one, there may be an extra fee--which can come from either the new or old service provider--to move your number. There's no word on how much that surcharge might be, but it is anticipated to cost up to \$50 to take advantage of the benefits number portability offers.

5. It may take a while. And bring a copy of your current bill.

Even if you decide to make the jump and take your number to another carrier (called "porting"), it may take a while to actually move that number. Carriers must have agreements between each other that govern the process of swapping numbers, and those agreements and procedures must be in place before you can move your number. Also, carriers can only "port" active numbers. So don't terminate your existing service before you sign up with your desired carrier. If you do so, you WILL lose your number. And finally, they will ask you for some basic information when porting your number. The information you give (essentially name and address information) must be identical with both your present and future carrier. For example, if your current billing statement shows a misspelled name, that same misspelling must be relayed to your new carrier. To avoid any

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problems, bring a copy of your billing statement with you. If the information doesn't match, the number will not be ported. Some carriers may provide you with a temporary number just to get you activated, and then when porting is complete automatically reprogram your phone to reflect the ported number. Finally, there is no time limit placed on processing a number port. Verizon Wireless has committed to port numbers in three (3) hours or less, however, the process can take days, so be patient, especially if you want to be one of the first to benefit from number portability. The first few weeks after November 24 will result in port delays and problems, and as the guinea pig, you should expect this.

6. Pay-as-you-go numbers are not immune.

A pay-as-you-go (pre-pay) number can be transferred to another prepay service but not to any other type of calling plan. If, for example, you have a pay-as-you-go model (such as the Audiovox CDM-8500) but want to make the transition to monthly service, you can't keep the number.

7. GSM phones have catches too.

In Europe, the greatest thing about GSM service is the ability to use just about any provider's SIM card in a single handset. This is simply not the case in the United States. When GSM carriers (Cingular, AT&T Wireless, and T-Mobile) sell a mobile, they lock the SIM card; thus, a card from another carrier can't be used for service.

8. Phones sold on auction sites (or even used ones) aren't always a great deal.

Whether you're trying to sell or buy a handset online, or receive a used one from an acquaintance or friend, know the history of its previous number. If there's an outstanding balance tied to that number (or SIM card), the carrier will not activate the phone to work on a new account, without the existing balances paid off first.

9. Number portability costs are already appearing on bills.

Whether you take advantage of number portability, it's probably going to cost you. Service providers have the right to recoup the expense of government mandates from customers, and many of them are already doing it. Costs that appear on monthly bills will vary by provider and will show up in the fees section. Typically, allow as much as 10% more than your standard airtime plan costs to account for the applicable and associated taxes and fees.

10. New deals on service have more catches.

During the holiday season, we'll see more deals for phones and plans. But now more than ever, it's imperative to read the fine print of a contract, as service providers offer the best deals for signing a two-year contract. Watch for any promotional benefits you may receive on your plan; they may be good only for the contract term, not for the life of the activation. Because many plans may continue on a month-to-month basis after the contract expires, many benefits may end when the contract does. Also, expect a call from the carrier you left if you decide to switch, as they will attempt to win you back as a customer, but remember contract terms and termination fees may apply if you return to them.

11. Which number will you keep?

Local-number portability will involve, in the near future, both mobile and landline numbers, which means you can transfer an existing landline number to a cell phone line. This does not mean, however, that both the landline and the mobile can share the same number. It's one or the other. Pager numbers are currently not included in the number portability mandate.

12. Be informed before you make the switch.

All of the wireless carriers have links published on their internet websites regarding Wireless Number Portability. It is in your best interests to review what your present and future wireless providers have to say regarding this new benefit; especially in terms of cost, processing time, procedures and market availability.

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