

## **CHANGING CARRIERS**

### **A DCA Tip Sheet for Mobile Phone Users**

New Yorkers who are unhappy with their mobile phone carrier will be able to keep their phone number and switch services. But beware--just because you can switch carriers doesn't mean you will get a better deal. Making the switch could mean higher costs.

Consumers want more flexibility from their mobile carriers--they want to take a familiar mobile phone number with them when they switch carriers. But be careful to check out all the costs before making the switch.

Consumers should check for hidden costs, compare carriers, and not rush into a decision.

#### **□ CHECK YOUR CONTRACT**

November 24, 2003 is the first day New Yorkers will be able to keep their mobile phone number but use a different carrier. The contract with your existing carrier probably includes an "early termination fee" which can cost as much as \$175. You may want to wait until your current contract expires before making the switch.

#### **□ CHECK YOUR PHONE**

You can take your number with you but the mobile phone you currently are using probably will not be usable with the new carrier. You may need to purchase a new phone. Ask the carrier if they will provide a free phone when you switch.

#### **□ CHECK YOUR CURRENT USAGE**

Be prepared. Before you talk with a carrier about switching service, analyze your current usage.

*How many minutes do you currently spend on the mobile phone?*

If you use the mobile phone ten minutes every day--that's roughly 300 minutes per month. If your carrier charges both for incoming and outgoing minutes, that's even more. Most carriers round up to the minute so if you only talk for 20 seconds, that still is a one-minute call. The Federal Communications Committee estimates that on average mobile phone users use 427 minutes per month.

*What type of calls do you make? Do you make most of your calls locally? Do you travel a lot and incur a lot of roaming charges?*

Some people may be best served with a plan that offers a mobile-to-mobile plan because most of their mobile phone conversations are with other mobile phone users. Others may want a plan with long distance charges rolled into the basic plan instead of paying a per-minute long distance rate.

Now that you are prepared, you should shop around. There's no need to rush your decision. In the next several weeks, carriers probably will be offering new plans that may be perfect for you.

#### **□ COMPARE THE PLANS**

This is easier said than done because each carrier uses different definitions for their services, so consumers need to question the carrier about the offered plans. Choosing a mobile carrier is confusing. The industry agreed to abide by a ten point consumer plan which basically is a promise to disclose information about the costs for their plans, termination fees, surcharges and contract terms, and services they offer. But each carrier has a different basic plan--some waive roaming charges, some do not. Some "rollover" unused minutes, some do not. Some offer great deals but the deals may not be right for you.

Here are some sample questions you should ask:

- How does the carrier define the local calling area? What is the cost of calls made outside of that area? How does the carrier define national vs. network coverage?
- Is there a roaming fee for calls made to or received from outside of the home area? Is there a different charge for long distance calls?
- Does the carrier provide mobile-to-mobile minutes?
- Does the carrier charge a fee for incoming calls?
- What exactly is included in "free" night, weekend, off-peak or anytime minutes? Do they only apply to calls made in your local area? Can they be used for long distance calls?
- When can you make changes to your contract without being charged? (Some carriers permit changes to be made within six months of the service.)
- What is the per-minute charge after you exceed your free minutes?
- Is there a charge for incoming calls as well as outgoing calls?

### **SOME FINAL ADVICE**

If you are dissatisfied with your new carrier, you can cancel the contract. Each of the six large carriers servicing New Yorkers promises a two-week period in which a customer can return the phone, cancel the service and pay only for the activation charge and the airtime used.

Be careful before signing up for a long-term contract. It may seem like a great deal. But if you are dissatisfied with the service, it may be very costly to switch to a different carrier afterwards.

IF you make a switch, don't end the old contract until you are notified the new one is in place. It should only take a few hours, but it could take much longer. If you end the old plan first, you will lose the phone number you're trying to keep.