

The New York Times

Cellphone Number Transfer Hits a Snag

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Byline: MATT RICHTEL

Hundreds of thousands of consumers have switched mobile phone providers in the last 10 days since new federal rules went into effect allowing them to keep their cellphone numbers when they change carriers. But mobile phone users looking for improved phone reception and service have discovered a new problem: technical glitches and delays in making the number transfers.

Tens of thousands of customers have had to wait several days for their old numbers to work on their new phones and some have waited more than a week — even though switching a number is supposed to take only a few hours. In fact, according to people in the industry, the automated computer processes that are designed to carry out the number switching have been failing about 50 percent of the time — making it necessary for the wireless carriers to check the customer data manually, a time-consuming task.

The problems prompted the Federal Communications Commission yesterday to send a letter to AT&T Wireless, one of the largest mobile carriers, asking the company to explain the reasons for the delays and what it is doing to remedy the problem. AT&T Wireless said that its automated number switching was failing about 60 percent of the time, higher than the industry average.

Competitors and industry analysts have said that AT&T Wireless had experienced problems both in sending its numbers to other carriers and in receiving the phone numbers of new customers.

Rochelle Cohen, a spokeswoman for AT&T Wireless, said that the company was "working as hard as we can to address the operational issues" but that the company was still "telling customers to expect number porting to take approximately five days."

She said the company looked forward to responding to the letter from the F.C.C. Although delays at AT&T Wireless appear more pronounced than at other carriers, all are facing similar problems. According to reports from analysts and consumers, most switches have taken longer than a few hours, the goal regulators hoped carriers could achieve. Bryon Tramont, chief of staff for the F.C.C., said the regulatory agency fully expected AT&T Wireless and the industry to perform better. "It's slower than we thought it would be," he said. "If this is as good as it gets, we'd be extremely disappointed and we'd consider other enforcement actions." But, he added, "every indication is that it's getting better by the day."

Even as it struggles to improve its switching speed, AT&T Wireless may be getting bad news about its subscriber numbers. Industry analysts and wireless companies said that about 80,000 Americans were switching providers each day, and that the preliminary numbers suggested that AT&T Wireless was losing more customers than other companies.

The analysts said Verizon Wireless and T-Mobile were gaining customers, while Sprint PCS, Nextel and Cingular Wireless are losing roughly the same number of customers as they are gaining. The companies, however, declined to give specifics on customer turnover, saying they would release figures only when they report their overall company performance.

"It's premature and speculative to declare so-called winners and losers at this early stage," said Ms. Cohen from AT&T Wireless. She said the company would release figures at the end of January when it made an earnings filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Before the number transfer rules went into effect on Nov. 24, the mobile industry cautioned that there could be delays caused by the automated computer systems designed to move customers' numbers from one company to another.

A carrier signing up a competitor's customer has to enter that customer's name, address, Social Security number and other data into its computer system, making sure that it matches data from the transferring system. If the data does not match up, the two companies must then manually verify the information, a process that can take days.

Ed Evans, the chief executive of TSI Telecommunication Services Inc., which operates the automated hand-off service for five of the major mobile companies, says another problem is that individual carriers' computer systems have at times gone down, causing requests to expire before they can be fulfilled.

A spokesman for Verizon Wireless, Jeffrey Nelson, said there was no single reason for the delays, with the carriers and their hardware and software partners all sharing responsibility.

The situation is improving, he said, and yesterday afternoon Verizon was telling customers to expect number transfers to take anywhere from "a few hours to 72 hours," depending on what company they were switching from.

Some analysts speculated that AT&T Wireless might have longer-than-average delays because it uses a different transfer processing service than the other mobile companies. It uses NeuStar Inc., based in Sterling, Va., for automating its number switches while the other carriers all use TSI. But Venkates Swaminathan, a senior vice president at NeuStar, said he did not think that either AT&T Wireless or NeuStar was performing less well than the competition because the troubles spanned the whole industry.

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Cell Users Struggle to Shift Plans under New Portability Rules

Knight-Ridder Tribune

Tue 30 Dec 2003

Section: Telecommunications

Byline: By Ellen Lee, Contra Costa Times, Walnut Creek, Calif.

Source: Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News

Dec. 30--One month after cell phone users gained the right to keep their numbers when they switch wireless carriers, thousands of frustrated consumers have logged complaints with the Federal Communications Commission.

Between Nov. 24, the first day that consumers were able to carry over their numbers, and Dec. 24, the FCC recorded nearly 2,400 informal complaints, the agency said Monday.

Most griped about the delays that they faced. Some cell phone users have been forced to carry around two cell phones for days or even weeks while they wait for their old cell phone carrier to transfer their number to their new one. And it's not just the cell phones that are weighing them down.

"They have two cell phones and two cell phone plans, and they will be getting two cell phone bills," said Janee Briesemeister, director of Consumers Union's "Escape Cell Hell" campaign. She estimates that the group has received about 800 to 900 complaints.

Regulators are monitoring complaints but have not launched an investigation, said Rosemary Kimball, a spokeswoman for the FCC. She said the complaints appear low compared with the estimated 250,000 requests so far from consumers to transfer their numbers.

Cell phone carriers, which say they have since become better equipped to handle the requests, have emphasized that the process is a complex one that can be easily tripped up as one carrier hands off the phone number to its competitor.

"It's coming slowly but surely," said Mila Fairfax, a spokeswoman for Nextel. She said the company has been updating its employees with "best practices" so that they don't make the same mistakes repeatedly.

Of the FCC's complaints, more than half, about 1,220, were directed at AT&T Wireless. They were followed by Sprint PCS with 518, Verizon Wireless with 406, Cingular Wireless with 359, T-Mobile with 256 and Nextel Communications with 154.

Earlier this month, the FCC sent a letter to AT&T Wireless inquiring about the problems. AT&T Wireless responded that it has since upgraded its software to handle the number transfers.

"Now we feel that our performance is on our par with the rest of the industry," said Gina Perneti, a spokeswoman for AT&T Wireless. "The kinks aren't all worked out yet, but it is an industry-wide challenge, and we'll continue to collaborate on improving the process."

Separately, California Public Utilities Commissioner Susan Kennedy asked an arm of the state PUC to track complaints from consumers trying to transfer their numbers. As of mid-December, the PUC has received 86 complaints, of which 60 percent were about AT&T Wireless.

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Switch Cell Phone Firm, Keep Number, Expect Delay

Knight-Ridder Tribune

Wed 10 Dec 2003

Section: Telecommunications

Byline: By Mary-Beth McLaughlin, The Blade, Toledo, Ohio

Source: Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News

Dec. 10—A little more than two weeks after customers were given the option of switching phone carriers while keeping their cellular number, the Federal Communications Commission has received more than 700 consumer complaints through Monday alleging unnecessary delays in the process.

Phone companies serving the Toledo area acknowledged yesterday that there have been lengthy delays in some cases, but assured customers it's not intentional.

"It's very important to remember it's a very complex endeavor that is new and technically involved," said Paul Sopko, general manager for the Toledo area for Cricket Communications Inc.

"It relies on integrating a lot of different carriers and different systems, so it's not been surprising that there have been some initial bumps in the road," he added.

New rules that took effect Nov. 24 in the country's largest areas allow customers to switch wireless carriers yet keep their same cell phone number and opt for getting rid of a home or business phone and switching the number to their cell phone.

The changes are taking much longer than anticipated, prompting complaints. According to the FCC, the six carriers mentioned most are AT&T Wireless (332 complaints), Verizon Wireless (129), Cingular Wireless (98), Sprint PCS (94), Nextel Communications Inc. (46), and T-Mobile USA Inc. (44).

AT&T Wireless said yesterday it has improved software to speed the process and will notify the FCC today of measures taken to improve service.

Representatives of wireless phone companies interviewed yesterday said the majority of the requested switches are from one cell phone carrier to another, but they declined to reveal how many customers they gained or lost, or how long the switching process was taking.

Laura Merritt, the Columbus-based spokesman for Verizon Wireless, said in cases where the switch is taking longer than the two to 48 hours that the company had promised, new Verizon customers are being given temporary numbers so they have uninterrupted cell phone service. She acknowledged that carrying two cell phones is cumbersome.

"It's not specific for Toledo. We have seen some industry-wide hiccups in the porting process, but they're diminishing each day as we and the other carriers get better at the whole process," she said, adding the industry plans to spend over \$1 billion in the first year to handle portability.

Bill Hardekopf, of CellUpdate.com, which monitors the cell phone industry, said the FCC's requested goal of having a change made in a little more than two hours was never realistic.

A major issue, he said, has been glitches in the way requests are handled through a national database controlled by a private Virginia company.

In verifying that the customer on the bill is requesting the change, the database has been rejecting applications if, for example, "Bill" is used on one form and "William" on another. Or if "Drive" is spelled out on one address form and abbreviated on another.

"That was something that people didn't really expect," said Mr. Hardekopf.

A second glitch came because a number of providers had only signed agreements with each other in the week or two before the Nov. 24 deadline, so time has been spent ironing out operational differences.

Said Andrew Moreau, a spokesman for Alltel Communications, "When the FCC came down with its guidelines, every carrier interpreted them differently from another carrier."

He added, "We're telling customers sort of the same thing we've been saying from the beginning. It will take up to three and four days to make the switch. We're hoping to get that down and do it quicker."

To see more of The Blade, or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to <http://www.toledoblade.com>

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Cell Phone Users React Coolly to Portability Freedom

Knight-Ridder Tribune

Mon 15 Dec 2003

Section: Telecommunications

Byline: By Jerry Lynott, The Times Leader, Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

Source: Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News

Dec. 15--Cell phone users are staying put, reacting coolly to their newly granted freedom to port or transfer their old numbers when switching to a new carrier in their service area.

The rush expected when local number portability went into effect Nov. 24 locally and in the top 100 markets nationwide, turned out to be a trickle.

Service issues, no overriding desire to switch and penalty fees as high as \$200 to break an existing contract have contributed to a less-than-enthusiastic reaction by consumers.

Analysts predicted between 1 million and 9 million people would attempt to port their numbers in the first 24 hours, said Travis Larson, a spokesman for the Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association.

"We never made any predictions," he said.

Instead Larson pointed to data from TSI Telecommunication Services Inc., a Tampa, Fla.-based communications technology company processing portability inquiries for five of the six wireless carriers in the United States.

The company reported it processed approximately 80,000 inquiries within the first 24 hours.

A Gallup poll conducted shortly before the effective date for portability found approximately one in eight people planned to switch. Most of those who planned to port would do so within three months, according to the poll results released Dec. 8. The poll further found even one in 10 people planned to switch their landline home or business phone numbers to a cell phone — also allowed under the new Federal Communications Commission rules.

"The industry originally projected a lot more porting than what happened," said Kevin Head, an account manager for Verizon Wireless in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

He and others in the cellular phone industry agreed that there were service issues to be worked out and people might be waiting for that to happen before switching.

"Customers are asking a lot of questions. I guess the biggest thing they were looking at ... was the time frame," said Head.

The industry set a transfer time target of 2 1/2 hours, but the time has varied among carriers. Last week AT&T Wireless told the FCC it corrected a software problem that prompted complaints of delays of days in transfers by the company.

Larson said the goal is for all transfers to meet the industry target as the novelty of the process wears off.

"If you don't need to transfer right away, you might want to wait until after the holidays," he advised.

You might want to check with your current carrier first before switching, added Joe Bradshaw, general manager of the WirelessAdvisor.com Web site.

With portability available, carriers are trying to hold onto existing customers and offering unadvertised "customer retention initiatives," said Bradshaw. "It's much easier to retain a customer than to get a new one."

Cell phone companies might agree to give you a new phone or add minutes to your plan. "That may tip the balance that you might want to stay," said Bradshaw.

The quality of service is one reason why people are switching.

They're fed up with dropped calls, frustrated with the dead zones in the network or dissatisfied with the customer service. "Typically everybody is switching to a better company," said Christopher Slatky, sales manager with Digital Plus Wireless in Wilkes-Barre.

Don't switch expecting perfection from the new company, cautioned Bradshaw. "People should be aware that none of them are perfect."

But Verizon Wireless might be pretty close. Customers are giving "network quality" as their reason for porting to the company, said Howard Waterman, a spokesman for Verizon Wireless.

Of the nation's 150 million cell phone customers, Verizon has 36 million followed by Cingular with 23 million, said Waterman.

Traffic in the company stores around the portability effective date was two to four times more than the same time last year, said Waterman. "Many customers were asking about it."

Exact numbers on people porting to and from Verizon Wireless won't be available until next year when the company's fourth-quarter earnings

results come out, he said.

But not all the traffic could be attributed to people looking to port, Waterman noted. The effective date coincided with the start of the holiday shopping season and people often give wireless phones as gifts.

Cingular spokeswoman Alexa Kaufman reiterated Waterman's comments on fourth-quarter results and the interest of customers have shown in number portability.

The switching process has been improving since the rollout last month. But the companies are not entirely at fault. Customers share some of the blame because they've provided incorrect information needed for the switch, said Kaufman.

"If it doesn't match, it can mess things up," she said. The information provided to the new carrier must be identical to what the old carrier has from spelling of name and address to old account number.

To minimize any delays in processing, customers should provide a copy of their old bill with all the pertinent information, Kaufman said.

There's no need to rush to switch either, added Kaufman. An early termination of an existing contract could cost as much as a \$200 penalty, so wait until the contract expires.

Portability is part of life now, she said. "It's not as if this isn't going to be here."

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Consumers Face Long Delays in Trying to Transfer Cell Phone Numbers

Knight-Ridder Tribune

Fri 05 Dec 2003

Section: Telecommunications

Byline: By Vikas Bajaj, The Dallas Morning News

Source: Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News

Dec. 5—Many consumers trying to transfer their **cell phone** numbers to different companies are encountering long delays caused by incorrect data, technical glitches and a growing backlog of transfer requests at **wireless** companies, industry experts said this week.

Almost two weeks into the federal number portability mandate, the transfer process, which was expected to be troubled initially, is underperforming even those low expectations, these people say. More than half of all transfer requests are requiring manual processing, adding further delays.

"It has been worse than we feared shortly before going in," said Roger Entner, an analyst with the Yankee Group, a research firm.

"We did a brief report saying there would be a rocky start," Mr. Entner said. "This would be way beyond rocky. The system is straining at all levels from the automatic porting to the manual porting, to basic breakdown of business practices."

Phone companies and **wireless** retailers such as RadioShack Corp. said many transfer requests are being processed automatically through computer systems and industry clearinghouses.

"The transferring or porting process is mostly taking about as long as we predicted ... anywhere between a few hours and a few business days," said Travis Larson, a spokesman for the Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Association.

"We hope that every port going forward gets a little faster."

Experts have singled out one company — AT&T **Wireless** Services — for having the longest delays and the most orders requiring manual processing.

"A disproportionate number are having problems with AT&T," said Janee Briesemeister, a policy analyst at Consumers Union, which has been soliciting consumer feedback on its Web site www.escapecellhell.com.

"We have heard it's taking several days for AT&T to release **cell phone** numbers and sometimes more than a week."

On Thursday, the Federal Communications Commission sent AT&T **Wireless** a letter asking for an explanation of its problems and what it was doing to fix them. The company has until Wednesday to respond.

An AT&T **Wireless** spokesman conceded that more of its orders had to be processed manually — more than 60 percent — than the 50 percent industry average. But he said the entire industry was dealing with the same glitches, which were expected.

"We have our issues and we are dealing with them, and the other carriers do as well," said Mark Siegel. "Our error rate is a bit above the industry at this point in time, but it's very early."

(AT&T **Wireless** is a separate entity from the long-distance company AT&T Corp.)

Plano resident Tom McGinnis canceled his AT&T **Wireless** service Thursday after waiting almost two weeks for his number to be transferred to Verizon **Wireless**.

Mr. McGinnis' transfer was tied up because AT&T **Wireless** had assigned his Social Security number to his wife and vice versa in its database. After spending hours on the phone with the phone companies, he decided he would be better off distributing new numbers to friends, family and co-workers.

"I would rather call them and send them e-mails and give them new numbers," he said. "It's better than dealing with this."

An AT&T **Wireless** spokesman declined to discuss Mr. McGinnis' delay. "We are making every effort to resolve it," said Rebecca Noah-Poynter. "It's fair to say that we apologized for the frustration."

In the months leading up to number portability, phone companies assembled hundreds of workers in large call centers to handle transfer requests. They troubleshoot transfers with counterparts at other companies and industry clearinghouses.

A consultant who manages one such center for a phone company said his agents were spending as much as 45 minutes to an hour on hold to talk to agents at other companies.

"We are throwing more and more bodies at the problem to move the process faster," said Greg Douglass, a vice president at Cap Gemini Ernst & Young in Irving. "Some of the carriers were clearly not prepared for the onslaught of" orders requiring manual processing.

Interestingly, excessive consumer demand is not the cause of the backlog. Mr. Douglass said transfer requests have been low most days and

typically less than the 80,000 requests handled on Nov. 24, the first day of number portability.

Mr. Douglass cites three key failures:

Consumers and sales people are entering requests with inaccurate names, addresses, etc.

Phone companies' billing systems have incorrect data such as Social Security numbers for their customers.

Some carriers weren't prepared with enough well trained agents.

Tying phone company computer systems together to verify and transfer numbers is bound to be difficult because they were never meant to be connected, said David H. Murashige, a Nortel Networks vice president.

"That's not how you set up your customer database," he said.

In most cases, the breakdowns have meant consumers are carrying two phones for several days as they wait for their number to make its way to their new device.

But for at least one Dallas resident has lost cellular service for more than a week.

Karen Potaszniak's five Sprint PCS cell phones stopped working soon after she tried to transfer the numbers to Cingular Wireless on Nov. 25, the second day of number portability. In the next few days, three of her Cingular phones came to life, but she and one of her three daughters remained without service until Thursday.

"The worst case scenario to me is my daughter Amanda, God forbid, is driving home at night without a cell phone," Ms. Potaszniak said. "That's what I really want it for. That's why I am really angry about it."

A Sprint spokeswoman said the company only received requests to transfer three of the Potaszniaks' five numbers to Cingular and couldn't explain why her phone had stopped working. A Cingular spokeswoman said she couldn't talk in detail about individual transfers but blamed a backlog and the added complexity of transferring five numbers at once.

"Many of the transfer requests that came in the first few days were caught in a backlog as all the systems and process hiccups were worked out," said Annette Teter of Cingular.

Officials and analysts said Ms. Potaszniak's experience is rare, because consumers should continue to have service on at least their old phones during the transfer process.

Consumer advocates and experts are advising consumers to wait another few weeks before moving their phone numbers because of the delays.

Mr. Douglass said he is waiting. "I see it on the inside, and I know it's not working so well."

To see more of The Dallas Morning News, or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to <http://www.dallasnews.com>.

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RSH, AWE, T, CAP, PCS, BLS, SBC, VZ, VOD.

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