

Telecos' 'revolutionary' plans come with a catch

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NEW DELHI: Did you know that Tata Teleservices' 'revolutionary concept' of duration-free calls, where the user is charged Re 1 for every local call and Rs 3 for STD no matter how long the call lasts, has a catch? Well, try making use of it regularly and the company will say you are misusing it.

The telco reserves the right to cut the call or charge an additional rate after the first 10 minutes in case it finds out that the customer 'regularly misuses' the offer. It will monitor the talk time of customers to prevent misuse. Only, it has not specified what amount of usage is misused.

Tata Tele is not the lone heart breaker in the highly competitive telecom space where companies are announcing price-cuts and innovative call rates almost every day. There are devils in the fine print of most of the lucrative offers, be it from market leader Bharti Airtel, Reliance Communications, Vodafone Essar, Idea Cellular or Aircel, as customers who lapped up these offers are beginning to discover.

Take Bharti Airtel's recent announcement that all its 110 million customers can enjoy STD and local calls at 50 paise/minute.

This tariff is available only on calls within Bharti's network, and that too only to those prepaid subscribers, who opt for this tariff plan by buying the Airtel Advantage Plan vouchers.

Put simply, over 90 million existing prepaid customers of Bharti Airtel cannot avail this offer unless they buy specific recharge vouchers and opt for this new plan.

Atul Bindal, Bharti Airtel's president for mobile services, however, claimed that the offer will benefit most of its users, as internal studies by the company showed that more than 95% of its customers make local or STD calls to another Airtel number. "The biggest differentiator is that we have a 110-million base," he added.

The fine print for this plan from Bharti also reveals that the tariff for calls to other mobiles and landlines (non-Airtel) varies from circle to circle.

Meanwhile, Vodafone Essar has launched an even more attractive plan that offers local and STD calls to any network at 50 paise/minute. However, here again, only those customers who opt for its new regional packages for different zones by buying specific recharge vouchers are eligible to avail these tariffs.

And there is a bigger catch: STD at 50 paise/minute is limited to that particular zone. That is, if a customer from Chennai buys a Southern pack, the reduced STD tariff applies only to Karnataka, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. And a Delhi customer can make calls at

this rate only to those in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir.

A company spokesperson claimed that it is offering STD at 50 paise/minute across the country in some states where it launched operations recently.

Idea Cellular's new tariff package of SMS, STD and local calls at 50 paise/minute is open only for its Mumbai customers. The catch here is that only those customers who buy a new special voucher at Rs 47 can avail these rates. Also, these special rates are applicable only from the second minute of the first call of the day.

This implies that the customer will pay the earlier tariff for the first minute of the first STD and local call of the day. Likewise, the 50 paise SMS call rate will also be applicable from the second SMS of the day.

The company is in the process of extending the offer to other parts of the country.

Even Aircel's recent announcement of charging its customers on a per second basis is limited to just two circles — West Bengal and Orissa. Here again, the one paisa/second tariff doubles after the first 500 minutes and customers have to buy special recharge vouchers to avail this offer. Reliance Communication's latest offer of STD calls at 39 paise per minute to its GSM users is open only for its customers in Delhi and the NCR. A unique advantage of this offer is that it can be clubbed with other prepaid tariff plans.

When contacted, an official with the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) said the regulator will not interfere in the tariff plans offered by companies, but said it will examine, if telcos are making the fine print clear to their customers who buy these packages.

An executive with a leading GSM operator said while new tariff offers were flooding in, pricing had long ceased to be the sole criteria for customers to choose a service. "Pricing at times may add to an initial surge in intake, but prepaid customers are value seekers and move away, when the offer is withdrawn. This explains why 10-20% of all telcos' subscriber base consists of 'inactive user'," said the executive requesting anonymity.