PHRED SEZ ....

J. Fred Ettline, WBCCI #27910

Cell Phone Angst

I have been trying to understand the subtleties of my cell phone provider and plan. Since we don't use a cell phone much we chose a reasonably priced monthly plan with 300 minutes, free nights and weekends, and nationwide long distance, providing you are on the SunCom/AT&T network. Other carriers offer free long distance if the call originates from your home service area consisting of one or two adjacent states. But it was the "nationwide long distance" and the phone's digital/analog multi-network capability features that attracted us to the SunCom/AT&T network to support our frequent Airstream adventures to all parts of the country.

At home I was beginning to enjoy the plan with free nights and weekends and would postpone calls to friends until the free time frame. Being able to sit down and visit with someone without worrying about charges is a liberating feeling. We began to keep the cell phone on 24/7 since digital service only requires battery charging about every four days. An unanticipated advantage is that family and close friends can reach us when we are using the hard-wired house phone for Internet access. When we went for a cruise and were cruising south five miles off Miami Beach, we made some phone calls from the top deck. This was fun!

But there was trouble in paradise. When we subsequently docked in Key West, Florida, I could not get a SunCom/AT&T signal from the open air on the tenth deck, even though their coverage map shows service there. Several weeks later on a free-call-Saturday while visiting friends in another part of South Carolina, I tried to make a long distance call since my phone was displaying SunCom/AT&T. Each time I would dial I got a busy and hung up. Then I would scroll down to my intended contact and press send, only to get another busy signal. Before initiating the next sequence I was shocked to see that the phone was displaying **PARTNER**. Mind you I was sitting in a rocking chair and had not moved since the first unsuccessful call. What distressed me was that "partner" (sometimes called "roam") calls are not free. If I had not been paying attention before making the redial attempt, succeeded in contacting my friend, and talked for thirty minutes, I would have been charged $22.50 for that one phone call. Roam air is 60 cents/minute and roam long distance is 15 cents/minute.

I called the company's customer service. Their response was that their name needed to be displayed on the phone's screen for the call to be free. I explained my rocking chair incident and said that it might take twenty seconds to scroll down to the correct phone number and initiate the call. What if the phone switched to "partner" during that time and I did not know it? When I start scrolling, their name disappears from the screen and after the phone is ringing or has been answered, there is no SunCom/AT&T display on the screen. Their response was that their name needed to be displayed on the screen for the call to be free. That's a pretty cavalier attitude when they are spending my money.

I persisted and was finally transferred to technical assistance. The representative explained that if the customer is situated where a SunCom/AT&T cell tower has limited signal strength (one or two of the possible four marks on the signal strength meter on the phone dial) because of hills or buildings getting in the way of the signal, the phone could actually switch to a stronger signal from a partner's cell tower. At least he understood my twenty second dilemma. Although he did not guarantee results, he gave me some tips to lessen the possibility of unknowingly switching to a partner during call initiation.

1. Since the antenna is near the top, hold the phone by the bottom to maintain optimal signal strength.
2. Try to have at least three or four marks on the signal strength meter before a call is made. You may have to walk to different areas and wait up to six seconds before the strength meter will indicate the stronger setting. If you do make a call with lesser signal strength, don't move your hand and watch the signal strength meter when the call is ringing. If your signal strength meter suddenly jumps to three or four, the phone has probably switched to a partner company's stronger signal. Hang up and try again.
3. Once you have signal strength of three or higher, make the call without moving your hand. After the call is made you can move anywhere and do not have to worry about switching to a partner since the call was initiated on the correct network.

The next two hints may only be specific to my carrier:

4. When the phone screen reads SunCom/AT&T there is also a "D" in the upper left hand corner to indicate that it is on a digital network. When I scroll down and initiate a call, if the "D" disappears, the phone has switched to another network. I should then hang up and try again if I want to avoid the 60 to 75 cents/minute charges.
5. When the phone rings with an incoming call there is no SunCom/AT&T designation to be seen on the screen. The technician said that if the incoming call lists the caller ID phone number it is coming in on the digital SunCom/AT&T network. If it just says "call" it is coming on a partner network and I will be charged roaming at 60 cents/minute.

Cell phones can be wonderful because they provide contact to medical or security assistance as well as connections with relatives and friends from the convenience of your hand. However, there are some operating regulations/rules, specific to each provider, that you need to be aware of to protect your best interests. Call your provider. If you don't get acceptable answers, ask for your anniversary date, mark thirty days before that date on your calendar and at that time call them to give notice you plan to terminate your service. Otherwise they will automatically sign you up for another year without any action on your part. If you don't give them thirty days notice before your termination date, an "early termination" fee usually runs about $200 even though you may have been with the provider for several years. Find a new provider that has rules and plans you can live with. But the switch to the new provider with portability of your old cell phone number has to be made before the current provider terminates your service.

The new book, Phred Sez - the First Ten Years, is now available on computer CD (written in Microsoft Works and also Microsoft Word). Order by mail for youself or for loved ones by sending a check for $15 each (includes shipping) to Fred Ettline at the addressed listed below.

Help me with topics for the PHRED SEZ column. Send your creative experiences and ideas by US mail, E-Mail,

Fax, or phone: *Fred Ettline*
39 South Hampton Drive
Charleston, SC 29407
Email ettlinef@netzero.net
Phone and Fax(843)766-9308

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