

## Cell Phones: New Developments

by Laura Forlano

Tuesday, November 25, 2003 12:00 AM

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On a recent Friday, I stood, shivering, on the dimly-lit corner of 116th and Broadway trying to call my friend on my new Sprint cell phone. As if dialing numbers on the tiny keyboard with winter gloves was not enough of an inconvenience, I found that the Sprint network was unavailable and that my phone was in "roaming" mode - looking for another network to place the call.

I dialed the number, waited a few seconds, and just when I thought that my friend's phone was ringing, I got a message from Verizon - was that James Earl Jones? -- saying that their network could not identify my phone. So, there I was, on my way to a party, but stuck in one of the city's many "dead zones".

One week later, I finally got around to reporting the problem on a [short survey](#) remembering Mayor Michael Bloomberg's announcement that the city is using the 311 non-emergency number and the nyc.gov Web site to collect and map information about these "dead spots".

In New York, mobility is not just a luxury, it is a way of life. And, many New Yorkers have come to rely on using cell phones to manage their lives, sometimes even canceling their land-lines in favor of their mobile.

By 2005, more time will be spent on cell phones than on land lines in New York according to data from Senator Chuck Schumer. This is true even when considering the large number of calls made in New York City, the world's biggest telecommunications market. In the next three years, the number of minutes of cell phone calls made in New York State is projected to increase 37 percent (66.7 billion to 106.2 billion) while the number of minutes of land line calls is projected to decrease 8.4 percent (106.2 billion to 98.0 billion).

Thus, poor reception quality and lack of cell phone coverage, is not merely an inconvenience, it is also a matter of public safety. Increasingly 911 phone calls are being placed on cell phones. According to Commissioner Gino Menchini, of the Department of Information, Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT), "in certain circumstances, cell phone dead zones create a hazardous condition for New Yorkers. We hope the cell carriers will use this information to improve the quality of their service for the good of their customers and the city."

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### KEEPING YOUR PHONE NUMBER

The city plans to make the results of its cell phone survey public on nyc.gov on the same day that a [new federal policy](#) (PDF file) goes into effect in the nation's top 100 metropolitan areas that allows consumers to switch wireless providers without having to give up their phone number.

In the past, many cell phone customers have been dissuaded from switching providers because they consider their phone number to be part of their mobile identity. Freelancers, consultants and small business owners rely on having a number where they can be reached anytime in order to keep in-touch with their clients.

In addition, the [Federal Communications Commission](#) ruling allows customers to change their home wire-line phone number into a cell phone number. According to The New York Times, industry analysts estimate that three percent to seven percent of telephone users in the United States - or 4.5 million to 10.5 million people - no longer have traditional land-lines and rely on cellphone services exclusively.

However, given the telecommunications failures of 9/11 and Blackout 2003, New Yorkers might want to think twice about taking their home number with them, at least until more reliable emergency communications have been implemented.

The city is also trying to make sure that wireless providers follow their own best practices, which were announced in September. Some of these include allowing for a 14-day trial period for new service and making service maps available at stores and on company Web sites.

Mayor Bloomberg's initiative shows support for this new federal policy and sends a positive signal to the wireless providers that serve New York City. The city can help providers improve their service but, in the end, if customers aren't satisfied, they can always switch providers.

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For years, wireless providers have been lobbying in Washington to prevent the implementation of this law which was part of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. This is because customers already switch cell phone providers more often than they change companies in other types of services. This is called the "churn rate";.

The new federal policy however, comes with a few caveats. Wireless carriers may charge customers a fee to move their phone number to another carrier. Getting a new phone also means having to re-enter hundreds of names and numbers into the address book of their new phones.

Since companies use different technologies, it is likely that customers will have to replace their phones. For example, an AT&T phone will not work on a Sprint network, and a Sprint phone won't work on a T-mobile network. Thus, many more cell phones will be [dumped](#) at landfills where they will be "leaking toxic metals and chemicals into the ground"; according to the Associated Press. About 100 million cell phones are thrown out each year in the United States.

On November 19, Senator Chuck Schumer warned New Yorkers not to sign new long-term contracts with their cell phone providers because they won't be able to take advantage of better deals which will be offered after November 24th. Many companies including AT&T, Cingular and Sprint have been pushing to enroll customers before the new policy goes into effect. The new policy will promote competition among carriers which will lead to lower prices and incentives for companies to improve their coverage.

The Federal Communications Commission expects six million of the 150 million cell phone subscribers nationwide to switch providers within the first seven days of the new policy. But, only 42 percent of wireless customers nationwide know about the new policy according to telecom consultancy The Management Network Group as reported by The Washington Post. Thus, the city's efforts to make this information more easily accessible to the public should be applauded.

I don't know about you, but after my experience standing in the cold in a "dead zone"; on Broadway, I'm certainly going to re-evaluate my cell phone provider once the new federal policy goes into effect.

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