

The 10 Biggest Problems With Wireless and How to Fix Them

Missed calls, dead zones, surprise charges. What are cellphone companies doing about them?

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Cellphones keep getting fancier. But the old problems never seem to go away.

Today, you can get gadgets that let you browse the Web, locate the nearest restaurant or even watch live TV. But customers are still griping about hassles that have plagued cellphones since day one. Networks often drop your calls, and coverage can be spotty, even in big cities. Then there are the nontechnical issues, like surprise charges, inscrutable bills and poor customer service.

"Despite having poured billions of dollars into their networks and call centers, wireless carriers continue to suffer from consumer frustration with their service, both in complaints to regulators and in customers switching to their competitors," says Charles Golvin, an analyst at Forrester Research Inc.

The good news is that companies are scrambling to come up with solutions to those longstanding complaints. Cellular carriers are improving their networks, streamlining their bills and improving their customer service. And technology start-ups are pitching in, introducing gadgets that let consumers do everything from make their phones more durable to boost reception in their home.

Customer complaints are a big part of these efforts. But there's another trend at work: As more people get cellphones, carriers are starting to focus on stealing customers from each other rather than recruiting new ones, Mr. Golvin says. And that means offering better service than the competitors do.

Here's a look at how companies are addressing those chronic problems -- as well as some new ones that are cropping up as phones get more advanced.

SPOTTY COVERAGE

Just about every cellphone user has a gripe about bad reception and dropped calls. Take Danielle Sucher and her boyfriend, David Turner. When they moved to a Brooklyn, N.Y., apartment in April, they discovered that her Cingular cellphone works throughout the apartment. But his T-Mobile phone -- which works fine elsewhere in the city -- gets reception only when he is sitting on the back windowsill.

"He really does curl up on the window sill to use his cellphone," says Ms. Sucher, an attorney. "He also often goes outside to get better reception, but that won't work out so well once winter comes."

Gaps in coverage crop up for a number of reasons. Sometimes cellphone companies can't find an ideal place to put antennas, or residents resist cellular towers as an eyesore. "Everyone wants great coverage for their cell service, but no one wants a cell tower in their backyard," says Michael King, an analyst at research firm Gartner Inc.

In big cities, "buildings can become obstructions that bounce waves all over the place," says Bill Ho, an analyst at Current Analysis Inc.

But most "white spaces," the industry term for coverage gaps, are in rural areas that aren't heavily populated, says Marina Amoroso, an analyst at Yankee Group. Since there are fewer potential customers to supply revenue, carriers often don't build infrastructure there.

The bad news: White spaces aren't going away. "These areas will decrease in size, perhaps by a little bit but it's not likely that carriers are going to cover 100% of the physical terrain of the U.S.," says Ms. Amoroso. "There is just no rational business reason to do so. However, they will do their best to cover close to 100% of the population."

Carriers are trying to improve the coverage picture on a couple of fronts. First, they're trying to close as many white spaces as they can by bulking up their networks. T-Mobile USA Inc., which is owned by [Deutsche Telekom AG](#), says it has added more than 2,000 new cell sites across the country, including New York City. [Sprint Nextel Corp.](#) says it's investing approximately \$7 billion to improve and maintain both its wireless and wire-line networks this year. Verizon Wireless, a joint venture of [Verizon Communications Inc.](#) and [Vodafone Group PLC](#), says it spends an average of \$5 billion annually to improve its network.

They're also making deals with roaming partners to lease coverage where it doesn't make sense for them to build towers. For example, Mr. Ho says, [Alltel Corp.](#) covers a good swath of territory, including the Great Plains states, that the national carriers don't. So many of them have roaming agreements with Alltel to provide seamless coverage for their customers in these areas.

Improving indoor coverage can be trickier, since it takes a powerful signal to penetrate the walls of a building, says Avi Greengart, an analyst at Current Analysis, a Washington, D.C., research firm. "If you don't have robust coverage outdoors throughout the suburbs and exurbs, it's even tougher to get a signal in that subscriber's living room," Mr. Greengart says.

Some carriers are pointing their antennas up to blanket high-rise buildings. Others are experimenting with a new technique: letting consumers make calls and receive them over their home Wi-Fi network instead of the regular cellular network.

Customers can also boost cellphone signals by installing antennas and repeaters on the roof of their home; some of these devices work in cars as well. This equipment is available from companies such as [Wireless Extenders Inc. of Norcross, Ga.](#), [Spotwave Wireless Inc.](#), of Ottawa, and [AlternativeWireless.com](#), of San Antonio.

Some companies are also building gadgets to help carriers. [TensorComm Inc.](#), of Westminster, Colo., has developed a tool to help cellphone carriers detect the source of interference in wireless networks and improve signal quality and data-transmission rates. The company says it has received interest from several wireless carriers, both in the U.S. and abroad. It expects to have its technology fully deployed by the end of 2007 or early 2008.

...AND NO COVERAGE

Carriers are attacking the coverage problem from another angle, as well. They're acknowledging that their service has gaps and advising customers to make sure they'll be able to get coverage before they sign up.

T-Mobile, for instance, says that it offers a service online and in retail outlets where customers can confirm that there's coverage in their area. Cingular Wireless has launched a similar online service that enables customers to enter their address and see coverage information for their area. And Cingular's retailers use the coverage map to check whether new customers will be off the network.

"Customers are now told at the point of purchase if they are in that situation," says Clay Owen, a spokesman for Cingular, a joint venture of [AT&T Inc.](#) and [BellSouth Corp.](#) "That way, there are no surprises."

Meanwhile, if customers do end up living in an area without coverage, the carriers are heading off complaints by advising them to find another service. Cingular requires that its national rate-plan customers live inside a Cingular-owned coverage area. They must also use more than half their minutes on a Cingular network -- in other words, they can't spend the majority of their calling time roaming. Customers who don't meet the conditions get a number of options, including changing providers or terminating service without penalty.

For instance, Brian Friedman, a mechanical designer, was a Cingular customer even though he lived in an off-network area -- River Falls, Wis. In June, he received a letter from the carrier saying, "If you do not find an alternative carrier or voluntarily cancel service, your account will be subject to cancellation at the end of your billing period after July 10, 2006." Mr. Friedman ended up switching to Verizon.

POOR CUSTOMER SERVICE

When Tara Hanney called her cellphone company a year ago to complain about dropped calls, she felt she was given more excuses than answers. The Sprint Nextel representative told her the dropped calls were most likely caused by overloaded cellular towers. Or the problem could be due to the company's recent merger. "Point blank, there is nothing we can do," Ms. Hanney says the representative told her.

Ms. Hanney, a Houston public-relations consultant, wasn't happy with that response. "Sometimes I felt the customer-service representative was not educated enough as far as the service, the company and what they should tell their customers," says Ms. Hanney.

Roni Singleton, a Sprint Nextel spokeswoman, says she can't address Ms. Hanney's complaints without getting more specifics about her case. But she adds, the dropped calls are "just a network issue." She adds, "The network wasn't affected by the merger."

Wireless experts say carriers have made a lot of effort to bolster customer service. They have improved, for example, the computer systems that representatives use, to make it easier to retrieve relevant information and answer customers' questions more quickly.

Meanwhile, "carriers are working to improve their self-care systems so that consumers have a better chance of being able to answer their own questions," online or directly through their phone, says Mr. Golvin of Forrester Research.

For instance, he says, some carriers allow customers to retrieve answers to the most-asked questions with text messaging or short-code dialing. You might punch in "*BAL" to check your account balance, for instance.

LENGTHY CONTRACTS

Cellphone customers frequently grumble about being locked into long wireless contracts. You're stuck for one or two years and canceling early means a hefty fee, usually \$150 to \$300.

Now companies are starting to give customers an easy out. Sprint Nextel, which charges up to \$200 for terminating service early, offers a 30-day grace period. New customers who decide to return their phone within that period won't be charged early-termination fees. Sprint Nextel also has a three-month rate-plan trial period that allows customers to make changes to their rate plan without requiring a contract renewal.

Starting later this year, Verizon will begin pro-rating early-termination fees, so the longer the customer is in a contract with Verizon, the less the early-termination charges will be. Cingular, meanwhile, has adopted a 30-day plan similar to Sprint Nextel's.

DAMAGED PHONES

Many carriers offer repair insurance on cellphones. But people without insurance are usually stuck buying a new phone if their old one gets damaged. Now third-party repair outfits are filling the gap, getting cellphones back in working order so you don't have to buy a new gadget.

In July, Suzanne Levine went to a T-Mobile store to see about fixing her cellphone, which was damaged in a swimming pool. Ms. Levine, a retired attorney in Tampa, Fla., says the representative told her the phone couldn't be fixed and she'd have to buy a new one. Ms. Levine did, but then decided to see if the old one really was gone for good. A local repair service, Cellrepair.us, fixed the phone for \$50 -- and Ms. Levine returned the new phone to T-Mobile.

Russell Galindl, founder of phone-repair service Fastcpr.com in Austin, Texas, says 80% of the phones sent to him have had water-damage problems. He charges a \$44.95 flat rate to fix a phone.

A start-up called Otter Products LLC of Fort Collins, Colo., is trying to solve durability problems in another way: waterproof cases for cellphones and PDAs. The cases are made from rugged polycarbonate material, similar to a football helmet. Cellphone cases cost around \$22, and PDA cases cost around \$100.

SURPRISE CHARGES

As most cellphone users know, the monthly bill can be a minefield of unexpected charges. Now carriers are trying to help users avoid or reduce some of the most common fees.

For instance, companies are introducing numerous tools that enable customers to control their roaming. Sprint Nextel says customers who use its Nationwide Sprint PCS Network can set their phones on a number of different roam modes. In "automatic" mode, for instance, the phone seeks Sprint PCS service first, and searches for an alternative when the service is unavailable. But when customers select "PCS" mode, the phones can use only the Sprint PCS network -- no roaming allowed.

Sprint customers also have a feature called Call Guard that alerts them when roaming charges will apply to a call. Verizon phones have a similar indicator that appears to let users know when they're roaming.

Carriers are also helping customers cut other surprise charges, such as overage fees. With the Sprint Fair and Flexible plan, for instance, customers automatically receive additional low-cost minutes when they use up their monthly bucket. Each additional 30-minute block costs \$5, rather than the regular overage charge of 40 to 45 cents per minute.

Meanwhile, to help parents avoid surprise charges on their children's bills, most cellphone carriers let parents set a PIN to control the purchases their children can make via handset.

COMPLICATED BILLS

Surprise charges aside, the monthly bill can be a nightmare to sort through, with page after page of industry jargon. Cellphone companies are working on making their bills more comprehensible by slimming them down and using plain language to describe the charges. Customer-service agents, meanwhile, are being better trained to answer questions about charges.

For instance, Sprint Nextel redesigned its cellphone bill last year, to make it easier to understand. The old bill, for example, had a header that read, "Voice Airtime Summary." In the redesigned bill, the header is much more comprehensible: "Minutes Used." The new bill also includes a concise, one-page summary of charges up front. The company is planning to release a new bill soon that's even more streamlined.

MISSED CALLS

Another big hassle for cellphone users is calls that get bumped to voice mail without warning. Sometimes the local cell tower is overloaded and can't complete any additional calls. Sometimes the signal gets interrupted by a tall building or a tunnel. With smartphones and BlackBerrys, incoming calls get shunted aside when users are browsing the Web or sending an email; the gadgets can't support voice and data simultaneously.

Some solutions to these glitches are beginning to appear in Europe. For instance, some European carriers can alert you to an incoming call if you're sending an email or Web browsing: The call gets converted to a text message, which you can then answer with the click of a button.

Similar fixes may soon be making their way to the U.S. Sprint Nextel, for one, says it is exploring solutions similar to the ones used by European carriers. And a New York-based start-up called SimulScribe Inc. has launched a service that uses voice-recognition technology to convert voice mail into text, which then gets delivered to BlackBerrys and Treos as email, or as text messages to phones that aren't equipped with email. The company says it's testing the service with one of the largest U.S. wireless providers, but won't disclose which one.

WEAK BATTERIES

Thanks to constant technological advances, battery life improves by about 15% a year. Most phone batteries will last about a day and a half if users talk on average an hour a day and send 100 to 200 emails or use the equivalent data time.

But the numerous new features being added to phones, such as TV and music downloading, are big drains of power. So carriers are exploring new ways to let customers power up. Sprint Nextel, for example, sells the Energizer Energy To Go, a portable charger, for \$24.99. That way, you can recharge your phone without having to plug into a wall outlet.

OVERLOADED

All those new features on phones can lead to many more problems than just drained batteries. Consumers get frustrated with unclear instructions and the multitude of buttons they have to push. For example, on the [Motorola](#) Inc. Q phone, which uses [Microsoft](#) Corp. software, callers need to go through five steps to take and send a picture, says Kirk Parsons, senior director of wireless service at J.D. Power & Associates.

Verizon Wireless just launched a free service called "Get It Now" that lets customers search for applications by entering or speaking keywords. Verizon also has started hosting free in-store workshops to teach its customers how to use and find features on their PDAs.

Sprint Nextel provides a downloadable user guide and tutorials on its Web site. Phones from [Nokia](#) Corp. and Sony Ericsson, a joint venture of [Sony](#) Corp. and Telefon AB L.M. Ericsson, have built-in systems to walk customers through their first use of an application, such as sending a picture.

Some companies have plans to introduce software you can add to your cellphone to demystify all those tricky new features. SNAPin SelfService, from SNAPin Software Inc., of Bellevue, Wash., will help customers find different content on their devices and provides tutorials on how to use certain functions. The software can also diagnose if there are problems with the device that need to be fixed, and if so can often help the user fix the problem without contacting customer service.

At the same time, some start-ups, including GreatCall Inc., of Del Mar, Calif., and Chicago-based Firefly Mobile Inc., are trying to remove the complications altogether with simplified cellphones targeting specific audiences. GreatCall's Jitterbug Dial and Jitterbug OneTouch, which were launched earlier this month, cater to baby boomers and seniors. The phones focus on basic functions and don't let users take pictures or surf the Web. They also have large, easy-to-use buttons.

Each phone costs \$147, with service plans starting as low as \$10 a month. [Vodafone Group](#) PLC has also introduced a simplified phone targeted at seniors.

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