

# Sprint Canada's altered calling plan hits students

BY KAREN RAWLINES

Sprint Canada's decision to cut off their unlimited calling plan is not ringing well in the ears of students and consumer rights groups who say they were not given proper notice of the termination of their enormously popular plan.

The plan was pitched in early July of this year, offering a package that entitled subscribers unlimited calling minutes after 6pm on weekdays and all day on weekends to anywhere in Canada for \$20 per month.

Melissa Doucette, a UPEI English student, signed onto the plan near the end of August to keep in contact with friends attending universities in other provinces.

"It really made a difference," she says. "I could talk to these people every day."

Clay Purves, a University of Winnipeg history student, shares Doucette's sentiments. He used the plan to keep in touch with his brother in Alberta, and friends who went to school in Ontario and B.C.

"It was nice to have a cheaper way to stay in touch with friends and family...to stay in close contact with people I wouldn't have otherwise had that kind of close contact with," he explains. "Otherwise, it would only be email or letter-mail, and those aren't the same."

Doucette feels the plan was largely successful due to the fact that Canadians live in a displaced society. The size of the country often means that circles of friends and families are scattered across several time zones. She notes that being able to contact graduate schools across the country at a reasonable rate was an added bonus for students.

Problems began early into the offer, as customers were met by busy signals or recorded messages when di-

alling through to long distance numbers due to network congestion.

Eventually, customer demand was more than Sprint could handle. The deal was discontinued, and replaced with a modified version effective October 5.

Jennifer Hilliard, vice president of policy and issues of The Consumers' Association of Canada, is not impressed by Sprint's decision to end their deal after only a month and a half of providing it.

"If a company offered something, and better demands than they were expecting followed, then they would be expected to bite the bullet," she says. "It's like they've offered steak, and are giving the customers beans."

Sprint is now offering customers a plan similar in concept, but very different in economy.

Instead of unlimited minutes per month, customers may now talk to anyone in Canada for up to 800 minutes under the \$20 charge, with additional rates of 10 cents added per subsequent minute.

Hilliard feels that the adaptation of the plan was not properly announced.

"All the notice has been in the form of vague media stories," she says.

Purves agrees. "If we didn't have a newspaper subscription we wouldn't have found out about it," he says. "I think they could have phoned us — they have our number." He adds that he will be returning to his local provider for long distance service.

The complaints of inadequate notice are coupled with customers' allegations that some television networks continued to broadcast the original advertisements for the unlimited plan as late as October 4. These conflicting messages have added to the confusion surrounding the plan.

Sprint Canada's aggressive advertising campaign proved to be a good business measure, but they quickly learned that they could not maintain the images detailed in their commercials.

"There was this target advertising to people away at university, to people who had family away," Hilliard says. "They were targeting people who are now going to suffer."

With many customers saving upwards of \$800 in long distance, the probability of unpayable bills -- resulting from the lack of information about

the modified plan -- is immense.

"Customers have to be notified before running off enormous bills," Hilliard says. She adds that Sprint Canada should provide some form of consumer redress to account for the rash of people who have missed what notice was given.

But Sprint maintains that the change in the plan is in an effort to provide customers with better service.

"The unlimited savings plan resulted in a new competitive marketplace, with all of our major competitors an-

nouncing similar plans to ours," stated Philip Bates, president and chief operating officer of Sprint Canada, in a press release.

"These plans have shifted residential calling patterns and the overwhelming response to these plans has meant some customers have experienced difficulty when they have tried to make long distance calls," he added.

"The plan was a great marketing ploy," Hilliard says, "but it was not wise to offer something they just can't deliver."

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