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Reading a wireless bill? Do sweat the small stuff

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It may be a little early to get excited about this, but there seems to be some good news for anyone who is willing to review a wireless phone bill.

So, for all of the legitimate (although there are those who would suggest that none of these line items are anything close to legit) surcharges, fees and miscellaneous line items that appear on phone bills which are, if baffling, at least permitted by the fine print in those contracts that no one (ok, except me) ever reads, this week, there is big news. On May 30, the Superior Court of Fulton County, Ga., gave its preliminary approval of a settlement (and, at the same time, certified the settlement class) for AT&T Mobility customers who may be eligible for refunds of unauthorized charges that appeared on their bills between Jan. 1, 2004 and May 30. That's right — there's a now a reason to examine your wireless phone bill line by line rather than just tossing it into the pile. And, while AT&T is the first wireless provider to be encouraged to settle, Verizon Wireless, Sprint Nextel and T-Mobile USA have been sued for the same violation. I suspect it's only a matter of time before they are forced to contemplate (and I use the term lightly) settlement as well.

Specifically, customers will be able to claim refunds for charges billed by third parties which appear on AT&T wireless bills dating from Jan. 1, 2004 through May 30. Those charges, which often appear as line items from other vendors (not the carrier itself), include charges for ring tones, daily text message services including, among other things, horoscopes, jokes, games, graphics, news as well as other alerts.

As a response to the 16 separate class action suits that are included in this settlement announcement, AT&T has changed its policy to require those customers who sign up for such services to confirm the order by replying to a specific text message. In this way AT&T believes that its customers will have at least more tools in place to prevent what may or may not be deceptive actions by third party companies from successfully using AT&T's billing mechanism to pass along third party charges. In fact, the fees generated by these charges were often split between AT&T (and presumably the other included wireless providers as well) and the third party.

A final hearing on the matter is scheduled for Dec. 8, and assuming that the deal is accepted, claims will need to be made within 90 days of that filing. Along the same lines of paying careful attention

to the small print, customers of AT&T's wireline (traditional) phone services should be wary that starting as soon as this summer, corporate customers may be charged to see call detail and other specifics related to their own usage of telecommunications services. In addition, the information provided by the carrier may not be in the format that customers are used to seeing (and/or processing). If you are considered a small business (under 20 lines), this change won't be of much interest. Move on to the next article of interest. But if you're a much larger entity and expect to see and review records, at least annually, it's not out of the realm of possibility that you'll be charged for the data, even though the information upon which it's based, is your usage.

This charge, however, is likely to be waivable, and this is where a good account executive, particularly one who is looking to secure more business, may be invaluable. As a rule of thumb, it's a good idea to sit down with your vendor quarterly (or, at a minimum, annually) to review existing usage, services and opportunities. If you know your account executive, get this on the calendar. If you don't, make every effort to locate him or her. A good — or bad,

for that matter — relationship can make all the difference.

As carriers consolidate and human interaction becomes harder to come by with the biggest providers, smaller providers often provide better service at a better price. Even if it's for a sanity check, particularly if you can't find a person to meet with at your giant carrier, bring in one of the competitors (Paetec, ChoiceOne, Global Crossing, just to name a few) for a "look-see." You'll be glad you did — either because they're offering something great (like service, or pricing, or both), or because the provider who has been ignoring you may just remember your phone number. an event and the rationale of any insurance disclaimer received. For plaintiffs' lawyers it is a reminder; for insurers it is a lesson.

(For more information related to the Dec. 8 hearing, visit www.thirdpartycontentrefund.com/Documents/ATT_Claim_Form_v3.pdf.)

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