

Press Release

Consumers Reminded to be Careful While Using Mobile Data Services

With the approach of the festive season, the Office of the Telecommunications Authority today (9 December 2010) reminds consumers to be careful when they use the mobile data services, particularly while roaming outside Hong Kong. Unintentional or inadvertent use of mobile data services may lead to hefty mobile bill charges and cause bill shock.

“Tens of thousands of Hong Kong people will travel to the Mainland or overseas during the upcoming festive season. When consumers travel abroad, they may use their mobile phones, handheld notebook computers or USB dongles to browse websites, access emails or enjoy various kinds of entertainment through mobile data services. In so doing, consumers should beware that charges for mobile data roaming services are usually quite substantial and are in any event much higher than those for local mobile data services,” a spokesperson of OFTA said.

To avoid unpleasant surprises, OFTA advises mobile service users, particularly those using smart phones, consider adopting the following measures to prevent bill shock:

- choose a data usage plan with a charge ceiling or unlimited usage (or unlimited data usage day plan for mobile data roaming services);
- switch off the mobile data service function on the mobile phone whenever they do not need to use the service;
- double check that their mobile data service function on the mobile phone is in the switch-off mode whenever they re-start their mobile phones;
- check data usage regularly through the function on the mobile phone; and
- check frequently that their handsets have not been switched to mobile data services while they are using the Wifi system for accessing Internet.

Consumers who do not need the mobile data services altogether may ask their mobile operators to deactivate the services at their convenience.

“Hong Kong has witnessed a flourishing mobile data services market in recent years. This is evidenced by the surge in the number of mobile broadband subscribers from 3.2 million as at July 2009 to 4.64 million in July 2010, representing an increase of

1.44 million in a space of 12 months. The data usage volume has also seen a three-fold increase during the same period, from 384 Terabyte to 1,236 Terabyte,” said the spokesperson.

In tandem, between January and November 2010, OFTA has received 1083 complaints relating to mobile data services (as compared with 337 received in the whole of 2009). Similar to the situation in other advanced economies, billing disputes accounted for a major share of such complaints, and close to 90% of which were caused by unintentional or inadvertent use of data services.

“OFTA has been monitoring closely the complaints statistics. We noted since end 2009 and over to the first quarter of 2010 an increasing trend in the number of mobile data services complaints and have initiated immediate action to address the issue,” said the spokesperson.

“In April 2010, OFTA formulated a series of mobile bill shock preventive measures and wrote to urge our mobile operators to implement them in May. These measures include operators allowing customers to opt-out of individual services; setting a charge ceiling; setting a usage cap for all kinds of usage-based mobile services; and alerting customers through short messages as their pre-determined usage threshold is reached, or when their roaming data usage is triggered,” the spokesperson elaborated.

“We are pleased that all mobile operators have readily implemented a combination of these measures to help customers to avoid mobile bill shock,” said the spokesperson.

To increase the transparency of service information, OFTA has posted to its website (www.ofta.gov.hk/en/tips/servicetype/mobile/mobilebillshock.html) the mobile bill shock preventive measures adopted by each mobile operator since August 2010.

“OFTA will continue to encourage mobile operators to further enhance their existing measures and introduce new measures to prevent mobile bill shock. We will update the information posted on OFTA’s website periodically and have just completed the latest update in November 2010,” said the spokesperson.

In parallel, OFTA has also launched a series of publicity programmes to educate the public on how to be a smart user of mobile data services. The programmes include TV and radio Announcements of Public Interest, newspaper columns, public and school forums, publications of consumer alerts, online games and quizzes.

“We are pleased to see that, with the implementation of bill shock measures and our consumer education efforts, the number of complaints has stabilized in September and October and has noticeably declined in November 2010,” continued the spokesperson.

To step up our consumer education effort, we will launch the second round of publicity campaigns on mobile data services later in December. More consumer advice on the use of mobile data services can be found at <http://www.mobilenet.gov.hk/en/home/index.html>

Office of the Telecommunications Authority

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