

Protecting Wisconsin Consumers for 75 Years

Slamming and cramming

Have you gotten a phone call offering to switch your long distance phone service?

Carefully check out the cost savings on these offers, and always review your telephone bills to make sure an unauthorized switch did not occur.

Thousands of consumers have complained to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the past few years about sudden, unauthorized switches in their long distance phone service—a practice known as “slamming.”

The FCC requires that phone companies get authorization from consumers before switching their service, but authorization may be written or verbal, and clever marketers have found creative, new ways to get consumers to authorize switches without realizing it. Some of the latest methods include:

- **Contests, drawings and sweepstakes**—Read the fine print carefully before you submit entry forms. Doing so may authorize a change in your long distance company.
- **Rebates and checks**—Again, read the fine print to find out what outcome will result from endorsing the check. If you can't make out

the fine print because it's too small, unclear, or unreadable, be suspicious.

- **Charitable causes**—Be wary about completing a form that appears to be from a charity soliciting a donation such as two percent of your long distance phone bills.
- **Marketing techniques**—Telemarketers may promise bargains like a certain amount of free long distance service. Even though you may decline, or ask only for information, you may discover that the switch was made before getting your go-ahead.
- **Surveys**—A telemarketer may contact you asking questions that sound like a customer survey. They may in fact be reselling you the service and carrier you already have. Be suspicious if they ask to record some of your responses. The only purpose for recording is to meet FCC requirements that allow recording as an option for authorizing a switch in service.
- **Consolidating bills**—Slamming frequently occurs when a company calls and offers to consolidate all of your telephone services on one bill. But most consumers

and small businesses already get one bill from their local telephone company.

You can check who provides your long distance service by dialing 1 (700) 555-4141 and your local toll service by dialing 1+your area code+700-4141. These calls are free.

How to Avoid Being Slammed

When choosing a long distance carrier you should:

- Ask for written information to review. Never sign anything without reading it carefully.
- Know the states and area codes you call regularly and calculate the costs for various carriers.
- Inquire about special packages that fit your calling needs, particularly if you make a lot of long distance calls.
- Ask about any special billing service offered and what the additional fees might be for the service.
- Be clear on the cost to switch long distance service.
- Call the state Public Service Commission to verify that the company is licensed in Wisconsin.

- Read your phone bill carefully.
- Ask your local telephone company if they are able to “PIC freeze” your long distance choice. This limits the changes which can be made without your written permission or a call by you to your local phone company.

You Can Protect Yourself From Slamming

If you are slammed, know your rights. You have the right to get your service switched back at no charge and be rebilled by the company that slammed you at the rates that your original carrier would have charged for the calls.

Follow these steps:

Call your local telephone company, explain that you have been slammed, and ask to be switched back to your original carrier with no “change charges.”

Call your original carrier, explain that you have been slammed, and tell them that you want to switch back and be re-enrolled in any special calling plan that you had previously selected.

Notify the Bureau of Consumer Protection by writing a letter describing the problem and enclosing a copy of your bill. Send a copy of the letter to:

Federal Communications
Commission (FCC)
445 12th St SW
Washington DC 20554

For more protection against slamming, call your local telephone company and ask

them not to change your long distance or local toll company unless they receive a written or verbal authorization from you. There is no charge for this service.

Don't be “Crammed”

When companies add charges to your telephone bill for optional services that you never authorized, such as voice mail, paging, a personal 800 number or club membership, it's called “cramming.” You can contest charges for services you did not request. Look at your bill closely every month. If you don't read your bill carefully, you could end up paying for services you didn't authorize and don't want.

Charges for various services should be itemized on your telephone bill. If you're not sure whether charges are connected with your regular telephone service or are for extra services, ask your local telephone company.

The name of the company providing services and its tollfree number should be listed on the page showing those charges. If you did not authorize the services, call that number and insist that they be canceled and the charges removed from your bill. If you can't get through to the company, call your local telephone carrier and ask it to file a complaint on your behalf. If you are disputing charges, make sure to pay the undisputed portion of your bill by the due date.

If the “crammer” agrees to remove the disputed charges, let your local telephone company

know. It can help you recalculate your bill, subtracting the disputed charges and any taxes or fees associated with them. If the “crammer” refuses, notify your local carrier that you're still disputing the charges. Your phone service should not be disconnected, but be aware that the “crammer” can refer the matter to a collection agency.

Protect Yourself

Read your telephone bills each month. Check to make sure that the long distance carrier you selected is still handling your calls. If an unauthorized switch occurs, call your phone company immediately and explain that no permission was given for the switch. You should not be billed for the cost to switch you back. You can also file a complaint about unauthorized switches with the FCC or the Bureau of Consumer Protection.

For more information, or to file a complaint, contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection at:

(800) 422-7128

2811 Agriculture Drive
PO Box 8911
Madison WI 53708-8911
(608) 224-4976

FAX: (608) 224-4939

TTY: (608) 224-5058

E-MAIL:
DATCPHotline@Wisconsin.gov

WEBSITE:
www.datcp.state.wi.us

(Some information taken from the National Consumers League, “You make the call”)