

## UNAUTHORIZED, MISLEADING, OR DECEPTIVE CHARGES PLACED ON YOUR TELEPHONE BILL - "CRAMMING"

### Background

"Cramming" is the practice of placing unauthorized, misleading, or deceptive charges on your telephone bill. Entities that fraudulently cram people appear to rely largely on confusing telephone bills in order to mislead consumers into paying for services that they did not authorize or receive.

In addition to providing local telephone service, local telephone companies often bill their customers for long distance and other services that other companies provide. When the local company, the long distance telephone company, or another type of service provider either accidentally or intentionally sends inaccurate billing data to be included on the consumer's local telephone bill, cramming can occur.

Cramming also occurs when a local or long distance company or another type of service provider does not clearly or accurately describe all of the relevant charges to the consumer when marketing the service. Although the consumer did authorize the service, the charge is still considered "cramming" because the consumer was misled.

### Cramming Charges: What They Look Like

Cramming comes in many forms and is often hard to detect unless you closely review your telephone bill. The following charges would be legitimate if a consumer had authorized them but, if unauthorized, these charges could constitute cramming:

- Charges for services that are explained on a consumer's telephone bill in general terms – such as "service fee," "service charge," "other fees," "voicemail," "mail server," "calling plan," "psychic," and "membership;"
- Charges that are added to a consumer's telephone bill every month without a clear explanation of the services provided – such as a "monthly fee" or "minimum monthly usage fee;" and
- Other charges from a local or long distance company for a service that it provides but, like the other examples, could be cramming if unauthorized.

While cramming charges typically appear on consumers' local telephone bills, they may also be included with bills issued by long distance telephone companies and companies providing other types of services, including cellular telephone, digital telephone, beeper and pager services.

### The FCC's Truth-in-Billing Rules

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has rules that require telephone companies to make their phone bills more consumer-friendly. These rules enable consumers to more easily determine, when reading their bills, what services have been provided, by whom, and the charges assessed for these services. Telephone companies must also list a toll-free number on their bills for customers with billing inquiries.



Such basic information empowers consumers to protect themselves from cramming and other types of telecommunications fraud. It also helps consumers make informed choices when they shop around to find the best telephone service to meet their needs.

## How to Protect Yourself and Save Money

- Carefully review your phone bill every month. Treat your telephone service like any other major consumer purchase or service. Review your monthly bills just as closely as you review your monthly credit card and bank statements.
- Ask yourself the following questions as you review your telephone bill:
  - 1) Do I recognize the names of all the companies listed on my bill?
  - 2) What services were provided by the listed companies?
  - 3) Does my bill include charges for calls I did not place and services I did not authorize?
  - 4) Are the rates and line items consistent with the rates and line items that the company quoted to me?
- You may be billed for a call you placed or a service you used, but the description listed on your telephone bill for the call or service may be unclear. If you don't know what service was provided for a charge listed on your bill, ask the company that billed the charge to explain the service provided before paying the charge.
- Make sure you know what service was provided, even for small charges. Crammers often try to go undetected by submitting \$2.00 or \$3.00 charges to thousands of consumers.
- Keep a record of the telephone services you have authorized and used – including calls placed to 900 numbers and other types of telephone information services. These records can be helpful when billing descriptions are unclear.
- Carefully read all forms and promotional materials – including the fine print – before signing up for telephone services or other services to be billed on your phone bill.
- Companies compete for your telephone business. Use your buying power wisely and shop around. If you think that a company's charges are too high or that their services do not meet your needs, contact other companies and try to get a better deal.

## Actions You Can Take if You Think You've Been Crammed

Take the following actions if unknown charges are listed on your telephone bill:

- Immediately call the company that charged you for calls you did not place, or charged you for services you did not authorize or use. Ask the company to explain the charges. Request an adjustment to your bill for any incorrect charges.



# FCC Consumer Facts

- Call your own local telephone company. FCC rules require telephone companies to place a toll-free number on their bills for customers to contact with billing inquiries. Explain your concerns about the charges and ask your local telephone company the procedure for removing incorrect charges from your bill.
- If neither the local phone company nor the company in question will remove incorrect charges from your telephone bill, you can file a complaint with the regulatory agency that handles your particular area of concern:
  - 1) For charges on your telephone bill for non-telephone-related services, your complaint should be filed with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). Call 1-877-FTC-HELP, or use the FTC's online complaint form at [https://rn.ftc.gov/dod/wsolcq\\$.startup](https://rn.ftc.gov/dod/wsolcq$.startup). (An example of non-telephone related services is "content" services such as psychic hotlines.)
  - 2) For charges for telephone-related services provided within your state, you should contact your state regulatory commission. This information may be listed in the government section of your telephone directory.
  - 3) For charges related to telephone services between two states or internationally, you should contact the FCC. Complaints about these issues may be filed with the FCC in writing, by phone or by e-mail. You may contact the FCC at:

Federal Communications Commission  
Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau  
Consumer Complaints  
445 12<sup>th</sup> Street, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20554

Phone: 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322)  
TTY: 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322)  
Fax: (202) 418-0232  
E-mail: [fccinfo@fcc.gov](mailto:fccinfo@fcc.gov)

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To receive information on this and other FCC consumer topics through the Commission's electronic subscriber service, click on [www.fcc.gov/cgb/emailservice.html](http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/emailservice.html).

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