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Government allows transfer of phone numbers

By Jonathan D. Salant
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The days of having more than one phone number may be, well, numbered for many people.

Federal regulators approved rules Monday making it easier for consumers to go totally wireless by allowing them to transfer their home number to their cell phone.

For those who favor traditional phones, the Federal Communications Commission also plans to allow people to transfer their cell number to their home phone, though initially only a few will have this option.

These rules, which come on top of plans to allow people to keep their cell number when they change wireless companies, are aimed at boosting competition in the telecommunications industry.

All the changes take effect Nov. 24 for customers in the 100 largest metropolitan areas. They will apply to everyone beginning March 24.

Consumer advocates predict the changes will lead to lower prices, better service and more options for phone customers.

It also is likely to spur more people to ditch the traditional landline phone and go wireless. "After today, it's easier than ever to cut

the cord," FCC Chairman Michael Powell said. "By firmly endorsing a customer's right to untether themselves from the wireline network — and take their telephone number with them — we act to eliminate impediments to competition between wireless and wireline services."

Chris Murray, legislative counsel for Consumers Union, which publishes Consumer Reports magazine, said the changes should spur competition in the local telephone market, which remains largely the domain of "Baby Bell" companies like Verizon and Qwest.

Phone industry officials complained the new rules make it easy for cell companies to take away their customers, but difficult for them to go after wireless users.

The reason has to do with the different local service areas for wireless and landline companies. Under the FCC regulations, a phone customer can unplug a corded phone and transfer the number to a cell phone if the wireless company serves the same area. But a customer wishing to transfer a number from a cell phone to a landline can only do that if the exchange — the three digits following the area code — falls within the same geographic area, known as a "rate center," in which the house or business is located.

As a result, local phone companies will be able to go after only about an eighth of cell phone customers, while the wireless industry has no similar restrictions.

BellSouth spokesman Bill McCloskey said, "These new rules say our wireless competitors can take our customers even though the technology does not allow us to offer the same benefit of number portability to the vast majority of their customers," McCloskey said.

Commissioners acknowledged the inequities, but said the chance to inject competition into the local phone market could not be passed up.

"While I do not believe that these concerns outweigh the very significant benefits to American consumers ... I do want to highlight my keen interest in working with the industry and the chairman and my fellow commissioners on solutions to address the inequity," Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein said.

As many as 7 million consumers use cell phones exclusively. Jeff Maszal, research director for The Management Network Group, an Overland Park, Kan.-based communications consulting firm, said another 10 million consumers are likely to drop their landlines for cell phones now that they can keep their home or business phone number

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