

Texting delays mar popularity of \$50 Boost plan

April 30 2009, By PETER SVENSSON , AP Technology Writer

(AP) -- A new \$50 unlimited-calling plan sold under the Boost brand has been a badly needed success story for Sprint Nextel Corp., luring hundreds of thousands of new customers, by industry estimates.

But dealers and customers report widespread problems with texting on the Boost network. Messages are frequently delayed by hours, in many cases reaching their recipients early in the morning.

"That kind of kills the point of using the text messaging feature," said Daniel Michael, a firefighter in Salisbury, N.C., who also works at a cell phone store. He and his wife signed up for Boost Mobile around the end of February, and use their phones to text their children, but often get delays of three or four hours.

"There's a huge deficiency in the text messaging and multimedia messaging," said John Kim, an independent dealer who has a Boost Mobile store in the Dallas area. He warns new customers about the problems, and tests the system by sending himself text messages.

"I got five text messages at 4 o'clock in the morning that I sent myself nine hours before," he said.

He's been signing up 10 to 12 new customers a day on the plan, three or four times the number that came in before the Boost Unlimited plan was introduced in January. But a lot of them come back, "very irritated" about the text messaging problems, he said.

"This trend of a lot of people signing up to Boost is going to disappear really quickly if they don't resolve the texting issue," Kim said.

The new Boost Mobile plan uses Sprint's Nextel network, which uses a different underlying technology than the main Sprint network. Nextel users have complained of occasionally delayed text messaging for years, but the network's main selling point has been the walkie-talkie-like "push to talk" capability, used by work crews and emergency responders. Now the new Boost plan has opened the network to a new category of customers, for whom text messaging is more important.

John Votava, a spokesman for Boost, said the texting problems are due to the influx of new customers, and denied that there are long-standing problems with the Nextel network.

"The popularity of Boost Mobile caught us off guard. It overwhelmed our system," he said. The company has been working "day and night" to fix the problems, and aims to have the system "much improved" by next week, Votava said.

Analysts expect Sprint to report Monday that Boost attracted somewhere around half a million subscribers in the first quarter, which would be a rare piece of good news for the company. The additions from Boost are not expected to outnumber defections from Sprint as a whole, however.

The Boost plan was partly a response to the network expansions of MetroPCS Communications Inc. and Leap Wireless International Inc. They have long offered unlimited calling for about \$50 per month in limited areas, but in recent months they've moved into big cities in the Northeast, greatly increasing their possible customers. Virgin Mobile later responded with its own \$50 unlimited prepaid plan, and T-Mobile USA started offering long-term customers a similar plan to keep them.

The experience of Jibril Sulaiman, who runs a cell phone store in Pensacola, Fla., supports the notion that the Boost network is congested. Messages he sends early in the morning go through with minimal delays, but those sent later in the day are sometimes held up for five hours. One of his employees who has a Boost phone activated another phone on another service just for texting, he said.

Despite the texting problems, it seems most Boost subscribers aren't giving up. In North Carolina, Michael said calls and the push-to-talk function have worked flawlessly.

Bryan Scheiber in Grosse Ile, Mich., signed up for Boost Unlimited in February, and has been mostly happy with it. The call quality is better than on his previous carrier, AT&T Inc., he said. He's woken up to find four text messages that were sent to him the previous day, but he's not a big texter.

"For the price," he said, "you can't complain."

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