

EAST VALLEY OPINIONS

COMMUNITY COLUMNIST

Open a Qwest bill with caution

I have a good friend who works hard for the phone company. We play tennis once a month or so and serve on a board together, so I'm hesitant about blasting her employer. But blast I must because your local phone company — and there's no need to be coy about this, it's Qwest — may be ripping you off.

I can almost feel the titterings of cynical mock disbelief rippling through readers of this paper as you roll your eyes and say, "What! Qwest? How could such a fine, upstanding company that is rarely in trouble with the Corporation Commission for more than 20 million bucks be doing anything nefarious?"

Now, those who know me are undoubtedly waiting for some droll other shoe to drop, expecting to find that I'm just being my usual prankish self.

All I can say is: Check your Qwest bill verrrry carefully, especially if you signed up for automatic payment as I did.

Here's the situation.

I have two phone lines coming into my apartment. I use one for normal telephone conversation and the other for my computer. Three and a half years ago, I called Qwest and asked them to discontinue my AT&T long-distance service as I had found an alternative low-cost provider. Of course, someone had to pay for the massive paperwork that this operation apparently entails, but I figured, what the hey, it's a one-time cost.

Fine. In April, I was perusing the monthly phone bill, which I try to do once in a while just to see how much shock I can put myself into. Remember, my bill is auto-paid so it's



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not like I have to open the invoice and get a check out by a certain date. But I know that, amid 5-10 pages of inscrutable charges, they like to occasionally insert some clever legal verbiage. Like the time they discontinued the free incoming first minute on my cell — and advised me about it in six-point type in the middle of the eight-page bill.

So I'm glancing at the bill for my computer line and it looks like it is a bit higher than usual — about \$8 more. That's odd because the amount hasn't changed since I had the line installed four years ago.

Guess what I found?

Go ahead. You won't believe it. What I found was that AT&T was charging me a "Universal Connectivity Charge," a "Regulatory Assessment Fee," a "Basic Rate Monthly Charge," and a ... get this ... "Bill Statement Fee."

Yes, friends, they were charging me for billing me.

Plus taxes and surcharges, of course.

I called up Qwest and said, "What's up?" Turns out that when I asked Qwest to fire AT&T, I didn't say the magic words "for all my lines, now and in the future." As a result, unbeknownst to me, I had retained AT&T for my computer long-distance calling. Since I have never made a long-distance call from my computer, I normally wouldn't have cared

much. Except, it seems that in January 2004 AT&T decided to start charging us all \$8 for our non-use (including the cost of sending the bill), and Qwest kindly includes it in its invoice.

I asked the Qwest rep how they could start charging me for something that I didn't know I had in the first place without my permission. She said a postcard was mailed out last October.

A postcard.

After much fussing and fuming, I managed to get the charges quashed, including charges that were about to hit my next bill.

But if you're having your Qwest bill automatically deducted from your checking account, you may not even be aware that this is going on. Please check your bill.

Naturally, the story doesn't end there. I just opened my latest bill. Yikes ... amundo! I won't bore you with the details now. Suffice to say that Qwest allowed some company to change my "interLATA," and there are \$31.99 worth of taxes, surcharges, "cost recovery" fees and other mystery charges.

The more I think about it, the more I think you shouldn't open your bill at all. Like looking under a rock on a hike, you could find things you're better off not knowing about.

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