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Confused about mobile phone plans abroad?

Language barrier on tariffs, plans could cost U.S. personnel big money

By Douglas DeMaio, USAG Bamberg Public Affairs

Confusing is one word to describe the complexities a Soldier, family member or civilian could face when exploring their options for a mobile phone. Mindboggling is another word to describe the feeling one may get when they receive their bill.

Communicating in the 21st century frequently demands a person own a mobile phone; life without one can leave a person isolated from friends, family and colleagues.

Selecting the right mobile phone carrier and plan while living overseas can be challenging for U.S. personnel. Mobile phone contracts can cost customers big money, especially when there is a language barrier and a misunderstanding occurs between a customer and sales representative.

So how should someone new to Germany approach the idea of getting a cell phone? What should they look for in a plan or know about mobile phone contracts?

Here are some things to consider when selecting a mobile phone.

Prepaid Phones

Prepaid phones are probably the best option for most people. There are no hidden fees or stipulations, no contracts and no cancellation fees associated with the phone use.

Other than paying for a higher cost per minute, customers can decide the amount they are willing to spend per month. The flexibility that comes along with a prepaid phone cannot be matched by any phone plan; customers don't have to worry about what they will need to pay at the end of each month.

For those who buy a prepaid phone card at Army Air Force Exchange Service, the card can be bought in dollars but the minutes are converted and charged in Euro. The phones can be purchased for a good price as well. Prepaid phones are available at AAFES for about $20. Prepaid phones purchased on the economy start out at a similar price and cost as much as €100.

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Army Emergency Relief Campaign

By Ashley Bateman, USAG Bamberg Public Affairs

The 2010 Army Emergency Relief Campaign will begin March 1 at Warner Barracks, and Army-wide.

The campaign is conducted annually between March 1 and May 15.

Army Community Service employee Eugene Newbold is coordinating the training for all unit AER representatives on Warner Barracks.

"The Army selected this time period to allow installations commanders maximum flexibility in scheduling their training and support missions," Newbold said.

Additionally, this timeframe enables local campaigns to coordinate and complete the campaign in time to meet the mandatory allotment start date, he said.

That date, directed by the Defense Finances and Accounting Service for all Military Services fundraising campaigns, is June 1.

Newbold listed the three reasons for the annual campaign:

1. To Promote awareness of AER and programs that are available to active soldier, retirees, widows and family members.

2. The campaign provides a wonderful opportunity for all active duty and retired Soldiers to contribute to the welfare of their fellow soldiers.

3. Campaign donations insure that AER meets the requirements for status as a non-profit, tax exempt 501 organization.

AER not only provides training for unit representatives or Keypersons, but also supplies posters, flyers and other publicity materials and information.

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Construction on JFK Boulevard to last until April

By Douglas DeMaio, USAG Bamberg Public Affairs

Construction on John F. Kennedy Boulevard will once again cause two lanes of traffic to be reduced to one, resulting in momentary delays for motorists.

Sensor-controlled traffic lights will control the traffic of the blocked lane driving from the bridge "Berliner Ring" toward Army Community Service. These lights will be located between the tennis courts and the road leading to the Freedom Fitness Facility.

The construction along this area is expected to last until the end of April.

Motorists will have to wait for a green light before proceeding through the one-lane

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Committing to a Contract

Mobile phone contracts are generally a two-year commitment and ending the contract is not always a simple task, depending on the carrier. Once a customer's signature is on the dotted line, there are serious financial responsibilities, as well as legal repercussions for cancelling an agreement.

Customers may not fully understand their phone contract, provider plan or legal rights, but not understanding does not mean the customer avoids liability.

Service providers Vodafone, O2, T-Mobile and E-Plus are the four major mobile phone providers in Germany.

If a Soldier deploys or changes duty station, there is no guarantee they can get out of their mobile phone contract without having to pay extra fees.

While some of these service providers have agreements with Army Air Force Exchange Service, not all do. Those located on U.S. military installations will have an agreement. These agreements allow a Soldier to get out of their contract if the Soldier deploys or PCS. However, there are certain restrictions, and customers should be aware that PCSing to other parts of Germany or Europe might not allow the contract to end.

Another thing Soldiers, family members and civilians should be aware of is that to end a contract, there has to be written notification. A mobile contract here in Germany does not simply end; three months before the contract should end, if there has been no notification to terminate the contract by sending a **Kündigung**, the contract is automatically renewed. Certain providers might accept the Kündigung in English while others may require it in German.

Plans and Service

The four major carriers each have their own plan and unique way of running the business.

While T-Mobile offers an English customer services line to those in Germany, E-Plus does not. According to a statement from E-Plus, since the company is a German mobile phone company, all its services will be in the German language, which could cost the company revenue.

The potential market for military mobile users in Germany is around $60 million per annum*.

Offering a service in the English language is definitely something to consider when picking a mobile phone provider. While none of the four major providers in Germany offer the Web sites in dual language, such as the English / Español option in the United States, some of the providers try to facilitate business in English.

Some European services are said to be 10 to 15 years behind the states; mobile phone services and plans fit this description.

Plans differ by company; calls to other service provider's networks, as well as texting, internet use and exceeding the plan's minutes, could cause the bill to be exceptionally high.

Plans are usually limited to 60, 120, 240 minutes, there are no carry over minutes and the price per minute to other networks is costly.

When looking for the right mobile provider, it is a good idea to see what provider friends and family use. Doing this will reduce the possibility of receiving additional fees on a bill.

Getting the Phone You Want

Smartphones have become the rave.

From HTC, LG, Nokia, Samsung and Sony Ericsson, almost every phone vender is making a Smartphone and the providers have exclusive contracts on phones.

Even Google is getting in on the Smartphone action.

While the Apple iPhone is unique to T-Mobile, the Palm Pre is unique to O2. Unless a phone can be unlocked from a network, customers don't have much of an option on what mobile carrier they will use, especially if their heart is set on getting a certain phone.

For those who purchase these phones, buyers beware. More customers will use these phones for accessing the internet or running an application. If users don't have the right plan, their bill will be very high.

For those that do have a good plan, read the fine print. Service providers have certain limitations on data rates. If a user exceeds their limitation, the speeds for both uploads and downloads will crawl to a rate similar to dial up – dial up noise not included.

Fine Print

Reading the fine print on a mobile plan is always one of the most important things to consider before signing a contract.

This is where one can find additional charges, restrictions and stipulations.

The phrase "the devil is hidden in the details" should come to mind when deciding on a plan.

Tax Relief (VAT form)

U.S. personnel cannot use a VAT form for telecommunication plans, contracts and minutes. However, customers can use the VAT form to buy a phone purchased separate from the contract and plan. The vendor must also be willing to accept the VAT form.

Customers should also be aware that a 19 percent tax will be charged to their mobile phone bill.

This is another reason why the prepaid phone is so appealing. There is no tax applied to prepaid phone card minutes purchased through AAFES, which could make up for some of the additional costs of prepaid minutes.

The bottom line is those new to Germany should do their research before making any commitments to mobile phone carriers.

**The potential market is based on 100,000 customers paying an average monthly mobile phone bill of €35. According to European Command - Force Strength, there are roughly 70,000 military and civilian personnel in Germany. This includes Airmen, Soldiers, Sailors and Marines. With dependants, the U.S. population in Germany nearly doubles to around 120,000.*