

Protecting Wisconsin Consumers for 75 Years

Slamming and cramming

Cramming is the illegal act of placing unauthorized charges on your wireline, wireless, or bundled services telephone bill.

Deception is the hallmark of cramming. Crammers often rely on confusing telephone bills to trick consumers into paying for services they did not authorize or receive, or that cost more than the consumer was led to believe.

Wireless consumers should be particularly vigilant.

Smartphones are sophisticated handheld devices that enable consumers to shop online from wherever they are or charge app purchases to their phone bills. The more your mobile phone bill begins to resemble a credit card bill, the more difficult it may become to spot unauthorized charges.

How does cramming occur?

Cramming most often occurs when telephone companies allow other providers of goods or services to place charges on their customers' telephone bills, enabling a telephone number to be used like a credit or debit card account number for vendors. Crammers may attempt to place a charge on a consumer's phone

bill having nothing other than an active telephone number, which can be obtained from a telephone directory.

What do cramming charges look like?

Cramming comes in many forms. Charges – such as those described below – may be legitimate if authorized but, if unauthorized, are cramming:

- Charges for services that are explained on your telephone bill in general terms such as "service fee," "service charge," "other fees," "voicemail," "mail server," "calling plan" and "membership."
- Charges that are added to your telephone bill every month without a clear explanation of the services provided – such as a "monthly fee" or "minimum monthly usage fee."
- Charges for specific services or products you may not have authorized, like ringtones, cell phone wallpaper, or "premium" text messages about sports scores, celebrity gossip, flirting tips or daily horoscopes.

How to protect against cramming

- Carefully review your telephone bill every month, just as closely as you review your monthly credit card and bank statements.
- Ask yourself the following questions as you review your telephone bill:
 - Do I recognize the names of all the companies listed on my bill?
 - What services were provided by the listed companies?
 - Does my bill include charges for calls I did not place or services I did not authorize?
 - Are the rates and line items consistent with the rates and line items that the company quoted to me?
- When in doubt, ask questions. 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 do not know what service was provided for a charge listed on your bill, ask your telephone company to explain the charge before paying it.

- Make sure you know what service was provided, even for small charges. Cramming often goes undetected as very small "mystery charges" – sometimes only \$1, \$2, or \$3 – to thousands of consumers. Crammed charges can remain on bills for years.
- Keep a record of the services you have authorized and used. 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 or other services to be billed on your phone bill.

What to do if you have been crammed

Take the following actions if your telephone bill lists unknown or suspicious charges:

- Call the telephone company responsible for your bill, explain your concerns about the charges, and ask to have incorrect charges removed. You can also call the company that charged you, ask them to explain the charges, and request an adjustment to your bill for any incorrect charges.
- If neither the telephone company sending you the bill nor the company that provided the service in question will remove charges you consider to be incorrect, you can file a complaint with the Wisconsin Department of Consumer Protection.

"Slamming" is the illegal practice of switching a consumer's

traditional wireline telephone company for local, local toll, or long distance service without permission. FCC rules also prohibit unreasonable delays in the execution of an authorized switch by your local telephone company. The rules provide a remedy if you have been slammed, discourage slamming by removing the profit and protect consumers from illegal switches.

How to protect against slamming

- Always examine your telephone bill immediately and thoroughly. If you see a new telephone company name on your bill, call the number that is shown on that portion of the bill and ask for an explanation.
- Be aware of the methods telephone companies can use to change your authorized telephone company legally. The FCC requires telephone companies to obtain your clear permission to make such a change.
- Be sure you understand that switching long distance service also means switching international service. Ask whether any international calling plans you have with your current long distance company will be offered by the new company.
- Ask your local telephone company to place a "freeze" on your account to keep anyone other than you from changing your authorized telephone company selection. Your written or verbal authorization will be required to remove the freeze.

Authorized switching methods

Your telephone service cannot legally be switched from your existing authorized telephone company to a new company unless the new company verifies the switch by one of the following methods:

- Using an independent third party to verify your oral authorization to switch.
- Obtaining your signature on a letter that indicates, in writing, that you want to switch authorized telephone companies.
- Providing a toll-free number that you can call to confirm the order to switch authorized telephone companies.

What to do if you have been slammed

If your authorized telephone company has been switched without your permission:

- Call the slamming company and tell them that you want the problem fixed and, under FCC rules, you do not have to pay for the first 30 days of its service.
- Call your authorized company to inform it of the slam, and that you want to be switched back with the same calling plan you had before the slam.
- Also, tell your authorized local telephone company that you want all charges for switching companies removed from your bill.

For more information or to file a complaint, visit our website or contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection.

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