

Pay phones provide a lifeline

REBECCA DUBE
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Is a pay-phone rate hike the telecommunications equivalent of a tree falling in a forest with no one around to hear it?

After all, cellphone trills are the new noise pollution and you can't throw a BlackBerry on Bay Street without hitting someone yammering away on a Bluetooth headset. So after Monday's announcement that the price of pay-phone calls may double, you may wonder: Who uses pay phones any more?

The poor, usually, and all of us, sometimes.

Nearly half of Canadians use pay phones at least a few times a year, according to a 2003 Ekos poll. And respondents said 90 per cent of those calls were very or somewhat important.

Not surprisingly, your need for pay phones increases as your income decreases: 88 per cent of low-income Canadians use pay phones at least a few times a year, according to a 2003 national survey conducted by the Montreal-based Union des consommateurs. That includes 22 per cent who use pay phones daily.

The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission decision to permit phone companies to charge 50 cents for cash calls at pay phones, up from 25 cents, came as a surprise to consumer advocates. Non-cash prices will also double, to \$1. The changes take effect June 1. The last rate increase was in 1981.

Though pay phones may be a fading fixture, people still expect one to be there when they need it.

Victoria Abad clutches her lifeless cellphone as she hangs up a pay phone in Toronto's Eaton Centre on Tuesday afternoon. "It's dead," she says, and she needed to call a friend. She only uses pay phones a couple times a month, but she doesn't like the sound of the rate increase. "That's crazy," she says.

Meanwhile, those who rely on pay phones are aghast - as most people would be upon hearing their phone bill is set to double.

"I had a cellphone but it was too expensive to keep," says Natalie Alexander, a 23-year-old factory worker who lives at a YWCA shelter in Toronto.

She uses pay phones to talk to her friends and her aunt in Brampton, who is her only family.

"Fifty cents, that's too much," Ms. Alexander says. "What if you look in your bag and you only have a quarter?"

The pay-phone sector "is not a vibrant market," acknowledges John Lawford, counsel for the Ottawa-based Public Interest Advocacy Centre, which opposes the rate increase. But he says the need for pay phones is real.

"It's sort of a lifeline service," Mr. Lawford says. "It's a big concern."

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Phillip Crawley, Publisher