



Regulator plans SMS tariff cut

MD HASAN

The telecom regulator is set to slash mobile short message service (SMS) charges by at least 50 percent, a move that is expected to encourage users to air more texts.

The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) decided in a meeting to cut SMS charges for all mobile operators. Under the move, the commission is likely to cap the maximum rate for each SMS, so that operators can charge as low as they like.

"The commission will disclose a new tariff plan for SMS services for the six mobile operators soon," said Zia Ahmed, chairman of BTRC, yesterday. "We are planning to cut the rate by at least 50 percent from the existing tariff."

BTRC formed a committee to recommend the tariff plan by this month, he said. "The existing charge for a SMS is a bit expensive, in comparison to voice service, although transmitting a SMS does not cost extra."

Mobile operators welcomed the move. However, the exiting Tk 0.20 interconnection tariff for a SMS remains a hurdle to making a huge charge cut.

Bangladesh's telecom market is yet to have a tariff plan for SMS.

Mobile customers have to pay a minimum of Tk 0.40 to a maximum of Tk 2 for each SMS in the six-operator market.



Presently, 53.83 million customers are using mobile phones in a population of 150 million in Bangladesh. The telecom penetration rate is around 34 percent.

SMS has become popular even though the tariff is greater for a SMS than a minute of a voice call. The cost of a voice call in the market today ranges between Tk 0.25 and Tk 1.25.

Market insiders said the ability to communicate confidentially with others without talking has popularised the SMS service.

Texting has been in practice since 1997 in Bangladesh, when Grameenphone launched the service for the first time. Subsequently, teens made the thumbing practice even more popular, as they could send greetings at once to a vast social circle during festivals.

Industry insiders estimated that the 53 million mobile users generate more than 20 million SMS a day, with the volume doubling during festivals like Eid, Valentine's Day, Friendship Day and New Year's Eve.

The market's top operator Grameenphone charges between Tk 0.50 and Tk 1 per SMS, while the second largest operator Banglalink charges Tk 0.75 - Tk 1.

Aktel charges Tk 0.40 for an SMS to other Aktel users, while to charges Tk 1 for SMS sent to other operators.

Warid's SMS charge ranges between Tk 0.29 and Tk 0.49.

Citycell offers the lowest tariff for SMS in the market -- each to the same operator costs between Tk 0.40 and Tk 0.25 and between Tk 0.90 and Tk

0.85 to other operators.

State-run TeleTalk offers each on net SMS Tk 0.66 and Tk 1 for SMS to off net customers.

The SMS charge should be reduced, as technically it is a hassle free service, said Zakiul Islam, president of the Association of Mobile Telecom Operators Bangladesh (AMTOB).

When mobile networks are fully saturated with voice service, networks for data service like SMS remains free. "So, we should encourage people to communicate more via SMS at affordable costs," Islam said.

Chris Tobit, chief executive officer and managing director of Airtel Bangladesh operations, said, "We are yet to know the BTRC decision. If the regulator decides to lower SMS tariff, it should be viewed in connection with the high taxation in the sector, which impacts profitability of our sector."

In India, Reliance Mobile recently took an aggressive move and cut SMS tariff to only one paisa for non-commercial use. The company now charges one rupee (Rs) for unlimited SMS in a day and Rs 11 for unlimited SMS a month.

Rifat Islam, a student of American International University Bangladesh, said, "Sometimes talking for a prolonged period of time over the mobile annoys me. At those times, I prefer SMS."

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iPad subscriptions could boost mag circulation

AP, New York

Magazine publishers may have a new way to boost flagging circulation: the iPad.

The Audit Bureau of Circulations said Tuesday that it has changed its definition of a digital magazine to accommodate the new class of tablet-style devices.

The new rules allow publishers to count paid digital subscriptions as part of a magazine's overall circulation as long as all the same editorial and advertising material is included.

That means publishers can custom design their articles and photo spreads for Apple Inc.'s iPad, which goes on sale April 3. Without the rule change, they could only count digital editions that appear exactly the way they do in print.

Magazines need the change because they charge for ads based on the size of their so-called rate base, the circulation they guarantee to advertisers.

By comparison, newspapers have had looser restrictions. Because they don't guarantee a rate base, they can count people who pay for access to their Web sites regardless of what ads run there.

In order for the tablet circulation to count, the Audit Bureau must approve each software application for the iPad and other devices. It already has approved one for Conde Nast's Wired magazine, which will be available for the iPad starting with the June issue. Conde Nast is also planning iPad versions of GQ, The New Yorker, Vanity Fair and Glamour.

Subscriptions on many existing e-readers, such as Amazon Inc.'s Kindle, don't count because those editions don't carry ads. But the iPad will have a backlit screen that can carry color advertising alongside articles, opening up another potential revenue stream.

Of course, magazines would only get this circulation boost out of the iPad if they can persuade readers to pay for applications. Few consumer magazines or newspapers have succeeded in getting large numbers of readers to pay for access to Web sites.

GQ's iPhone app, which meets the auditors' new guidelines, may provide the best barometer. About 6,800 people downloaded the first issue for \$2.99, according to company figures — not a significant rate compared with the magazine's overall circulation of just under 900,000. Still, it does seem to be moving in the right direction, with January downloads more than doubling to about 15,100.

X6 in Nokia stores

IT, TELECOM DESK

Nokia has started selling of its highly anticipated entertainment package, Nokia's X6 from March 15. The latest device from the leading mobile maker has been most awaited since its pre order stage.

The pre order started from the 19th February and continued till 10th March. The X6 was launched in conjunction with Nokia's dedicated web portal, nowplaying.nokia.com.bd, which allows fans to be connected with their favourite entertainers like Feedback and Fuad. The web portal hosts the artists' blogs and allows fans to comment and communicate with them.

The X6 will be available in 5 Nokia stores and 20 Nokia solution partners for the first week.

Three Nokia stores that are dealing with the pre orders of the mobile phone have arranged booths for music and games. Consumers can enjoy their favourite games and music there and can record and upload them to their devices on the spot.

Nokia also offering Nokia Bluetooth Stereo Headset BH-503 for first fifty consumers each who have pre ordered and bought the device from three designated Nokia Stores.

This offer will also be applicable to all Nokia play device, including Nokia X3, Nokia 5230, Nokia 5233, Nokia 5530 and Nokia 5800 from March 20.

Nokia X6 provides quality music capabilities on an all out entertainment package. It offers key features that ensures the best mobile music experience, including dedicated music keys, support for 3.5 mm connectors and extended battery life for music listening. The X6 is the ultimate device for social networking, with a 16:9 widescreen optimized for photos, videos and browsing and an easy access from the home screen to social networks, like Facebook and Twitter. The entertainment experience is completed by three embedded games, Spore by EA, Asphalt4 and DJ Mix Tour by Gameloft, and direct access from the home screen to download more games and applications through the Ovi Store.

It is capable of playing up to 35 hours of music, offering 16GB of on-board memory which can store up to 3,200 tracks on the device itself and supports all main digital music formats, with a slick 3.2" finger touch interface and a 5 mega pixel camera with Carl Zeiss lens. The latest edition to Nokia's touch-screen device portfolio, designed for people who love music, socializing and entertainment on the move. It is very rewarding for me today to see how excited all our consumers are to finally get their own Nokia X6", said Nokia representative Nowfel Anwar, Head of Marketing. It has a price tag of Tk 30,800.

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Facebook outstrips Google

THE FINANCIAL TIMES

Social networking website Facebook has capped a year of phenomenal growth by overtaking Google's popularity among US internet users, with industry data showing it has scored more visits on its home page than the search engine.

In a sign that the web is becoming more social than searchable, research firm Hitwise said that the two sites accounted for 14 percent of all US internet visits last week. Facebook's home page recorded 7.07 percent of traffic and Google's 7.03 percent.

It is the first time that Facebook.com has enjoyed a weekly lead over Google.com. The lead may be slim, but it has become inevitable as Facebook's popularity has grown rapidly from just over 2 percent of visits a year ago.

Heather Dougherty of Hitwise said that Facebook had "reached an important milestone" with the weekly figures.

Facebook's membership has more than doubled in the past year, passing the 200m mark last April and 400m in February.

"The true value of Facebook and social networks is just becoming clear to marketers," said Augie Ray, analyst at Forrester Research.



Although Facebook is enjoying rapid growth, it is only beginning to cash in on its success. Revenues at the social media company are estimated to be in the range of \$1bn to \$1.5bn this year, while Google took in \$23.7bn last year.

Google has responded to the ascendancy of the social networking site with its own Buzz service last month.

Buzz allows users to add status updates, friends, pictures, videos, location information, comments and links to other networking sites.

Buzz, though, has struggled with privacy concerns just as Facebook has been criticised for encouraging members to reveal personal data to search engines.

The Hitwise figures only cover visits to the Google.com site, meaning that services such as Gmail, YouTube, Google Maps and searches carried out in a box in a browser toolbar are excluded.

Taking all Google properties into account, the internet company accounted for 11.03 percent of US website visits last week, compared with 10.98 per cent for Yahoo properties and 7.07 per cent for Facebook, according to Hitwise.

Facebook's trajectory suggests that it will soar ahead of Google.com in the coming months.

However, social networking sites have fallen in the past. Google.com had led since September 2007, when it overtook News Corp's MySpace.com.

Internet users worldwide spent more than five-and-a-half hours a month on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter in December 2009, an 82 percent increase over the previous year, according to the Nielsen Company research firm.

TECHPHOTO

Robot maid

Mahru-Z (R), a robot developed by the Korea Institute of Science and Technology picks up a sandwich in Seoul on January 15, 2010. South Korean scientists have developed a walking robot maid which can clean a home, dump clothes in a washing machine and even heat food in a microwave. The institute took two years to develop Mahru-Z, which is 1.3 metres (4.3 feet) tall and weighs 55 kilograms (121 pounds).

PHOTO: AFP



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