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## Switch hit!

As telecom operators fight over number portability, it's the subscribers who are getting squeezed

**Abhijit Sathe, Deeptiman Tiwary and Bapu Deedwania**   ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Posted On Thursday, February 24, 2011 at 03:32:05 AM

While the battle for 2G spectrum continues to hog newspaper covers and prime-time TV, there is an all-new war that has broken out between telecom operators that is messier and nastier.

It is nastier because it involves operators poaching each other's subscribers; and it is messier because their customers are increasingly getting caught in the crossfire.

Welcome to the street-fight called Mobile Number Portability. You will not hear any gun shots in your neighbourhood, but believe us it is getting bloodier by the day as operators try to hold back people, by hook or by crook, from moving to a rival network and, at the same time, use every trick in their log books to plunder a competitor's customer base.

On February 8, Arvind Salve, a medical practitioner, was assaulted by employees of an Airtel store after an unseemly argument over the delay in porting his number.

Hit on the head, he suffered "mute trauma" and has been suffering from acute back pain since. He has filed a police complaint.

Get the picture?

According to Telecom Regulatory Authority of **India** (TRAI) data, 1.71 million of 740 million subscribers in **India** applied for number portability till February 5. Government data shows that about 16 per cent of these requests have been rejected for various reasons -- chiefly 'wrong porting code'.

While some of these rejections could be attributed to technical glitches and human errors, 'wrong Unique Porting Code (UPC)' is an excuse widely being used by operators to hold back (read harass) customers seeking to move to another network.

Unique Porting Code is an eight-digit, alpha-numeric code generated by Mobile Clearing House, the agency entrusted with implementing number portability, once a subscriber sends it a request to switch networks. The subscriber submits this code with the relevant documents to the Recipient Network (his future service provider). Once the recipient gets the code, it starts port process with the Donor Network (the network which is losing a customer).

This is where the donor starts to try and retain the customer either by giving him sops or through other means, which include rejection of porting application on various grounds like

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through others means, which include rejection of porting application on various grounds like non-payment of bills, subscriber being part of a corporate account, or contractual obligations like a life-time card.

Now, let's look at a typical porting code -- VM118693. As the first two articles suggest, it is a code generated for a request to move from Vodafone to a rival network. Does it read like a complex code that a lot of people will get wrong when filling a form? If your answer is no, you got the drift.

In most cases, it's a mischief networks play to delay portability request, hoping the subscriber will get tired and drop the idea. And while they keep the subscriber hanging, their sales teams get time to convince him to not move.

Media professional Arun Sathe's request to switch from IDEA to Reliance was rejected twice, and on both occasions the reason given was the same -- invalid porting code. On both occasions, Sathe found that he had made no mistake in writing the code. While his request that should have been processed in seven days, it took over a month and during this period Sathe was flooded with calls from IDEA requesting him to retain their network.

Since the porting code is valid only for 15 days after its generation, once rejected, the customer has to go through the entire process all over again. "This is discouraging for the customer and often prompts him to continue with existing service provider," said a telecom industry official.

However, since there is no grievance redressal mechanism specific to number portability, service providers get away with murder.

In the United States and Australia, which use the same system as **India**, the number porting takes a little over two hours and 20 minutes respectively. In **India**, the official deadline is seven days. Even in Pakistan, it takes only three days.

But at one level, telecom companies' desperation to retain customers is understandable. Number portability is going to stir the market once again in terms of tariffs. Nearly 5.8 per cent, or 43 million of the 740 million mobile customers, are expected to avail of portability every year, if the first fifteen days' trends are anything to go by. **India**'s portability churnout is higher than developed countries like Australia, the US, and Singapore which have an annual churnout of 7 per cent, 3 per cent and 0.4 per cent respectively.

Telecom market research analyst Abhinav Shukla says, "Indian market is already saturated. There are 14 operators fighting for one of the largest telecom markets. Call rates have become so cheap that no company is making any money through them. It's just value-added services (such as ring-tones) and volume of subscribers that are keeping them afloat. Number portability will intensify this competition where subscriber suffering poor services will switch to better service providers at same or lower tariff plans."

In the long run, say analysts, this may lead to a consolidation. Senior Manager (research) with Market Xcel, a market research company, Gaurav Srivastav said: "As per some of our latest research findings, late entrants in the business who capitalised more on freebies are bound to lose in the longer run as their customers are gradually showing discontentment with their services. With time, this will lead to smaller companies being wiped out. They may be panic-stricken because of this."

Sanjay Kasturia, vice-president, Syniverse Technologies, which has the Department of Telecom contract for implementing number portability in north and western **India**, agrees there are problems but says these are just teething troubles. "These are simply natural challenges expected during the early phases of MNP rollout. However, There are no deliberate delays on part of service providers," he said. Telecom companies will definitely agree with that view, but talk to subscribers and they will tell you a different story.

**Portability trauma: A few who are still awaiting the switch**

**Abrahim Mathai**
**Portability choice:** Loop to Idea
**Applied on:** January 21
**Problems**
Mathai requested for a change in service provider four times, and each time, he says, "Somebody from the phone company would call me, listen to what I had to say very patiently, and ultimately, nothing would happen. After a few days, I received a communication saying my request has been rejected." Mathai said he is now more determined

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than ever to change to another network. "Service providers should realise that if this is their tactic of not letting customers go, it's certainly not working."
**Current status:** Still waiting to be ported


### Sajo K J
**Portability choice:** Loop to Idea
**Applied on:** January 25
**Problems**
Sajo calls his ordeal a "royal ride". Twice, Loop rejected his application to port the number to other service provider. Each time, the reason given was "invalid universal product code". What followed was a series of complaints to various authorities. Sajo wrote to Loop top brass, Idea Cellular and also to Telecom Regulatory Authority of India. Finally, under-fire Loop admitted to a "technical snag" and advised him to apply one more time. Sajo is still waiting for that 'snag' to get sorted... his number is yet to be ported.
**Current status:** Still waiting to be ported

### Subhash Ashar
**Portability choice:** MTNL to Vodafone
**Applied on:** January 25
**Problems**
Ashar said network problems forced him to switch to other service provider, and he promptly received a Vodafone SIM card after applying for number portability. Later, he got a message from Vodafone saying he couldn't use the SIM card as the portability request was rejected by MTNL. Five days later, the MTNL SIM card registration also failed. Despite several communications, Ashar didn't get back his 10-year-old number, which he discovered was allotted to some other customer.
**Current status:** Still waiting to be ported

### Sushil Pandya
**Portability choice:** Airtel to Reliance GSM
**Applied on:** January 23
**Problems**
To begin with, complete lack of communication after Sushil applied to Airtel saying he wanted to switch to Reliance GSM. After waiting till February 6 (14 days), he sent emails to Airtel customer care service, but received no reply. Later, he was told his request is being processed. And then, Sushil received another communication saying as per his request, the process was stopped. "I never asked Airtel to not process my request," an angry Sushil said, "Obviously, service providers are doing because they don't want to lose customers. And to achieve their means, they are resorting to harassment."
**Current status:** Still waiting to be ported

#### Industry reactions

### Mahesh Prasad, president (marketing), Reliance Communications

Reliance Communications have been the strongest advocate of Mobile Number Portability (MNP) over the past two to three years. MNP empowers customers to choose the operator while retaining the number. The growth of mobile telephony in the country clearly shows that the high usage/high-end post-paid & pre-paid customers were stuck with incumbent mobile operators, with number stickiness being the main reason.

It's too early to estimate what the gains or erosions would be. Our focus would be to the eminence that really matters to the customers and not the flurry of activities that may happen in the market.

### Spokesperson of Idea Cellular

MNP is a complex exercise involving enormous adjustments in back-end operations, network and technology deployment, and setting up systems and processes for its enablement. This has led to huge investments by operators such as Idea to enable MNP on our network so that mobile consumers can exercise their choice. The regulator, licenser and the industry have worked in tandem for the past two years to enable MNP in the country. With the roll-out of a process of this magnitude, some level of teething problems can be expected initially. The initial response has been positive for Idea. There is a clear indication that mobile users across the country are choosing to switch to our network."

### Airtel
Mumbai Mirror sent an email to Airtel officials, and even tried calling them, but they did not respond.

### Loop
Several attempts were made to contact Loop officials... emails were also sent to them, but

Several attempts were made to contact Loop officials... emails were also sent to them, but they chose not to respond.

**MTNL**

MTNL top brass and spokespersons remained unavailable for comment. They did not respond to calls, SMSes and emails

**What the rules say**

Telecommunication Mobile Number Portability Regulations of 2009 provide a seven-day period for porting a mobile number from existing operator (donor) to the preferred one (recipient)

**»** After generating a Unique Porting Code (UPC), one has to submit an application form to the recipient operator along with mobile number and the UPC. The mobile clearing house then sends the request to donor operator within 24 hours of receipt of application

**»** If all yardsticks are met by the applicant, the donor operator within 24 hours has to verify the information provided by the applicant and inform the mobile clearing house whether the customer was eligible or ineligible for porting

**»** Once the porting request is approved by the donor, the MCH will inform the recipient and within 36 hours, fix the time for disconnection of service to enable port transfer. The donor and recipient would inform the customer about the porting process through SMS

**»** Once the MCH fixes the porting time, it informs the donor and the recipient operators. Within one hour of receiving such request, the donor will port the number out

**»** Once the MCH gets compliance report from the donor and the recipient, it initiates process to provide a corresponding location routing number to the ported mobile and inform all access providers and ILD operators

**Why porting request can be rejected**

**»** Payment issues with donor operator

**»** Porting request made within 90 days of activation of the mobile number

**»** Request for change of ownership of mobile number is under process

**»** Mobile number sought to be ported is sub-judice

**»** Porting of the mobile number prohibited by a court

**»** Subscriber has asked for inter-region porting

**»** UPC code does not match with the UPC code allocated to donor operator

**»** Subscriber is in any contractual obligation with donor operator

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