

Opinion: Having irritated it own customers, Verizon zeroes in on FMCA

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I am sure it seemed like a great idea. Offer a special deal on unlimited internet data to people who love to travel in RVs. I am sure that Family Motor Coach Association felt the same way, which is why they were so eager to partner with Verizon on a new member benefit.

The promotion was soft launched last week to a select number of FMCA members. After all, because callers to Verizon “customer service” already hear the message “we’re experiencing a higher-than-normal call volume” almost every single time they call, the influx of a few hundred thousand new RV customers could be problematic.

Yet, the day the too-good-to-be-true deal was emailed to a few FMCA members, a couple of the lucky recipients posted the announcement on Facebook, and from there it went viral – faster than news of free pancakes for geezers visiting Quartzsite, Ariz.

The news leapt off Facebook to RV forums, and then to other forums not at all related to the RV industry or the RV lifestyle. Within hours, Verizon was inundated with new sign-ups, FMCA was scrambling to process a huge influx in new members, and FMCA members not invited to the initial roll out were fuming about the snub.

It didn’t take long for all of FMCA’s June allotment of unlimited data plans to be exhausted for the rest of the month, and people were put on waiting lists to establish service in July. When those allotments appeared to be exhausted a day or two later, Verizon did what it normally does – it cancelled the plan and left FMCA holding the bag and explaining to long-term members and new members alike what happened.

In a similar fashion, Verizon screwed Millenicom customers in October 2014 and the Huntsville, Ala., City Schools in September 2015.

Many RV owners, especially full-time RV owners, know Verizon to be long on promises, like boasting of the nation’s largest 4G coverage area, but short on delivery, like failing to tell people they need to be within a mile of a Verizon tower on a clear day with no obstacles like trees standing between their devices and the tower in order for 4G to work.

It was Verizon that rolled out “unlimited data” several years ago and full-time RVers jumped at the chance to sign up. It worked well – very well – and people were singing Verizon’s praises. Then the bean counters took over.

The unlimited data promotion was ended, but those early adopters were “grandfathered” into the program as long as they never, ever made a single change to their account, like adding a new address or a new device. Unsuspecting RVers upgrading their phones soon learned they lost their cherished unlimited data plans.

Word spread quickly and RVers stopped updating their devices and, instead, opened a second account with other providers for phone service. I am sure Sprint, T-Mobile and AT&T were grateful for the added business while some Verizon hotshots got bonuses for further alienating their own customers.

Then, in 2015, Verizon started notifying its grandfathered customers that “unlimited” really did have limits, and those using 100 gigabytes of data a month – easy to do with just four family members using devices – were having their unlimited service discontinued within 30 days.

By the way, check with your home internet service provider and you’ll see customers can often use 350 gigabytes of data a month before the ISP will even clear its throat. A single Microsoft Windows update can gobble up half a gigabyte

of data in minutes for just one device.

Verizon's \$100 per month unlimited data plans were being switched to different packages where "extra large" plans allowed just 14 gigabytes per month for \$80. I saw my own cost for Verizon data jump to more than \$250 for just 40 gigabytes of data plus \$15 for every gigabyte I used that went over the 40 included in the plan. My bill exceeded \$400 some months.

Just as Verizon customers were adjusting their data use by cutting out streaming movies and scaling back surfing to accommodate the restricted data levels, Verizon stepped in with another brilliant idea. They relaunched "unlimited" data plans for everyone, but tossed in a few caveats to throw heavy users into a rage.

Verizon would "throttle" the data, meaning slow it down to 3G — 2010-era speeds — after any device racked up just 22 gigabytes of data. The company further restricted its own hot spots that it sold to unsuspecting customers for \$300 a piece to just 10 gigabytes of data per month before it was throttled back. Full-time RVers used the hotspots much like a home internet router by providing data to every family member.

When I was full-time RVing, I had a Verizon hotspot that used 95 percent of the 40 to 50 gigabytes of data I was paying for every month. Under the new plan, that device would be throttled to 3G speeds after a week's worth of use — and stay throttled until the end of the billing cycle — regardless of how much data I was willing to pay for.

So, as Verizon continues to bleed customers, its salespeople are undoubtedly on the lookout for more new customers to disappoint. Enter FMCA.

According to an email sent yesterday to FMCA's rash of new members by Penny Gortemiller, director of membership and chapter services, the association has been blindsided by Verizon. Here's what she wrote:

Ordinarily I wouldn't write to a new member before we've even processed your enrollment, but this has been an unusual week around FMCA.

Last week we launched what we believed was going to be an awesome new benefit exclusively for FMCA members. After all, our members are on-the-go motorhome owners and want to stay in touch while they travel! We've even heard that some people signed up for membership just to gain access to the Verizon unlimited on-the-go internet service.

But then, despite months of negotiations and approvals, Verizon unexpectedly pulled the plug.

If the Verizon benefit was your only reason for joining and you want to cancel your membership, just reply to this email and we'll take care of it.

But before you go, consider staying on as a member. Our president always ends his letters with "It's all about having fun" and that's the truth! FMCA members enjoy lots of great benefits designed especially for motorhome owners, but it's more than that — it's about being part of the best community of RVers you'll ever find.

And speaking of benefits — FMCA membership includes a best-in-class travel assistance service, money saving deals on tires, great member-only content, and many more deals, discounts and services for motorhome owners.

FMCA President Charlie Adcock also sent a message to FMCA members who have been part of the association for years. Here's what he wrote:

We thought today was going to be a day of celebration. As you'll read in the July issue of Family Motor Coaching magazine, our expectation was that we would be opening the doors to the latest and greatest member benefit — unlimited, on-the-go internet access at a great price for all FMCA members.

Unfortunately, despite months of negotiations, approvals and green lights, the provider (Verizon) pulled the plug at the last second. Magazines had been printed, pre-announcements tested, and the staff was standing by for the flood of enrollments.

For more background on how this situation unfolded, see the post here. <https://www.fmca.com/verizon/>

We are very sad. And disappointed. We were so excited to bring you this program because we know how important staying in touch – with reliable access – is while you're on the road.

Please don't give up on us. After the unexpected cancellation by Verizon, we're dusting ourselves off and getting back in the ring. We promise to keep working to bring you benefits of value and quality – the kind of service you expect from your RV family.

Thanks for understanding. And remember – it's all about having fun.

Yep, Verizon “customer service” strikes again. This time to irritate RVers yet again, make a major industry association look foolish in the eyes of its members and, like a tornado causing destruction wherever it goes, Verizon evaporates into thin air leaving others to clean up the debris the company leaves in its wake.

I've been a Verizon customer since 2009, when I moved to Arizona. But, every time I come to Wisconsin, I can't get a stable Verizon phone connection without standing 20 feet from a cell tower. Regardless of whether I am at home or on the road, almost every incoming and outgoing phone call is “dropped” by the company boasting of the largest 4G network in the nation.

The moral of the story is, if Verizon offers any data promotion, the promotion is very likely worth the paper it is printed on and, in the case of online stories, it is as empty as the air upon which its signals ride.