

A Preliminary Inquiry Into the Information Experiences of Canada’s Wireless Consumers

This paper reports on one phase of a larger telecommunications consumer rights and access-to-justice project, begun in 2014. It is our working assumption that communications services are more than a consumer service—they serve as an important access point for public legal education, content creation, and citizen engagement. Consumer rights in communications in Canada are defined in a complex and dynamic regulatory framework of federal and provincial/territorial legislation, policies, and regulations, which are difficult to navigate. As of December 2013, the core of consumer mobile telecommunications services came under regulation by the *Wireless Code*, enacted by the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC).

However, close to 50% of cell phone owners remain unaware of the *Wireless Code*—their key regulatory mechanism for consumers of wireless services. Despite frequent anecdotal accounts of “bill shock”, extraordinary roaming fees, or difficulties in managing data usage, the latest survey reports that Canadians did not lodge complaints with the Commissioner for Complaints for Telecommunication Services (CCTS), because 69% did not know about the CCTS, 13% did not feel it was worth the effort and 9 % did not think it would resolve their issue (TNS, 2016).

Moreover, few resources are in place to teach people how to identify, access, and take advantage of information resources and services to empower themselves as consumers in this complex communications marketplace and public telecommunications policy framework. Wireless consumers have a more complex ecology to navigate than do other types of consumers (Lunn, 2013). Specifically, wireless consumers need to improve their skills in how they articulate and then frame their interactions with their Wireless Services Providers (WSPs) to evaluate their information needs, seek context-specific information, make decisions, or if necessary, engage in self-advocacy.

The initial exploratory phase of this project addresses two research questions: 1) How do WSPs communicate and inform prospective or existing customers of their rights and obligations as prescribed by the *Wireless Code* in their pre and post-purchase interactions; and 2) How do wireless consumers frame and resolve their WSP’s contractual, service or device-based problems through the lens of information seeking and use research? Two pilot studies were completed to respond to these questions and are reported here: 1) Twelve mystery shopping interviews were conducted with six WSPs in the Ottawa area, each on separate occasions by a team of two student researchers and using two different scenarios to reflect common pre- and post-purchase consumer interactions; 2) Sixteen semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of adult wireless consumers in the Ottawa area, to explore how these users acquired their personal wireless devices and services, including how they manage their mobiles in their non-working lives. The results of these studies are reported separately.

Mystery Shoppers

Prior to conducting the mystery shopping interviews, we designed a comprehensive checklist based on the existing *Wireless Code* requirements and responsibilities of the WSP. Interviews were not recorded; ethics clearance was obtained. Corporate head offices of all WSPs were advised of our project and were notified that our researchers would be visiting in the Ottawa region during a fixed period of four weeks during the summer of 2015. We identified 38 discrete topics covered in the code; following each interview each researcher completed the checklist independently and then compared their results with their partner and then with the research team.

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Very few differences were noted; where they occurred, they were reviewed and discussed with the entire research team, and a consolidated checklist was then completed for each interview.

The major findings from this pilot study relate to information access and disclosure. The *Code* stipulates that WSPs must provide the customers with a “critical information summary” “when they provide a permanent copy of the contract” both of which are only required after the customer has agreed to a wireless service plan. This requirement was applicable in all twelve scenarios and yet not a single WSP discussed or presented these consumers with a critical information summary. One WSP showed the mystery shoppers a copy of the contract and briefly pointed out the terms without explaining them. The *Code* requires that WSPs offering locked devices must give customers the means to unlock the device upon request. In four of six scenarios where this element was a factor, no reference was made to unlocking the device. The *Code* requires provides WSPs offer customers a trial period of at least fifteen days. In none of the twelve visits were trial periods referenced. Options on security and credit checks are permitted by WSPs in the *Code*. Both scenarios were designed to require some form of credit check and security deposit; again no WSP mentioned security deposits and only one WSP mentioned credit checks, to these shoppers. Finally, as reported in the follow-up notes to each interview, only one WSP asked any questions related to personal usage or individual habits that might influence the type of service and contract that would meet their needs.

Wireless Consumer Interviews

Sixteen semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted by a class of LIS students in the fall of 2014. All students received twelve hours of training in interviewing, involving practice scenarios, with emphasis on neutral and open-ended questions. Each student interviewed an adult selected by and known to them; no demographic data were collected. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Interviews were coded thematically by a team of two student research assistants and the principal researcher. Although limited by sample size and convenience sampling, these interviews still offer preliminary insight into post-purchase problem-solving and information seeking behavior. Several informational themes were noted:

.1 Communities of experience

As problems arose for respondents, irrespective of the type of information they required, they consistently preferred online social forums to get detailed reviews from other consumers, share knowledge and rate their own experiences, over WSPs websites or service kiosks. This real-time feedback was preferred over direct communication with WSPs and was largely seen as a more trustworthy source of information. *“Forums I find are the most useful source of information because it’s basically as if you’re trying it yourself, but someone else tried it instead. It’s almost like a personal experience.”* (R1) *“I used the Internet to find people who actually have the phones and see what they liked, what they disliked, and what their experiences were the best information out there is from what other people are dealing with right now.”* (R6)

.2 Tech support

More than half of the respondents described situations where they (unsuccessfully) expected their WSPs to solve any technical functionality problems with their devices, *“I did talk to them and I find it’s kind of like a car salesman kind of deal they’re not super informed, necessarily about the information. You do find a couple of guys that are really more technical and do have*

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information but most of times it just teenagers with a part-time job. They, I mean, they're selling it. But they're not... they can't really back it with facts...." (R15) A few respondents reported how they attempted to resolve their own technical problems, using a variety of online information sources: "I didn't know too many people who actually had that phone, so I couldn't talk to them directly but I did go on forums and stuff like that and I did research the problems. I went on the Samsung website for troubleshooting. And just basic research off Google." (R12)

.3 Sub-optimal contracts, trust and loyalty

Several themes were repeated regularly in characterizing respondents attitudes and experiences with their WSPs and their contractual expectations and obligations. These include positive and negative statements of trust: "there's no incentive for them to be honest. They can tell me how many pixels there is, but they can't tell me this phone's fantastic, you'll love it" (R1) or "I have no reason to find the information to be false. I've never had any reason to believe I'm being shortchanged in that department." (R14). Confirming behavioral economist Lunn's work, (2013), loyalty, price, convenience and fear of the unknown were all mentioned in the context of negotiating WSP relationships. Statements connected to one or more of these themes were often used to justify why the respondent was staying or leaving their current WSP contractual relationship.

Conclusion

This study is limited in several ways, foremost the geographic concentration and size of data sample. However, even these preliminary findings can suggest ways the consumer's perspective in Canada's wireless services, legal and informational, ecology could be strengthened. Connecting consumer research with information behavior research, specifically the reference interview (Ross, Nilsen & Radford, 2009), everyday life information seeking (Savolainen, 2008), information literacy (Lloyd, 2010), information values, and information needs and uses (Case, 2012) could help both WSPs, their consumer clients and their policy regulators together create a more effective communications marketplace and informed citizenry.

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