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PETALING JAYA: They come riding on the air waves of your mobile phone. And each time they take a little from you, so little that you hardly notice.

But the total amount that many mobile phone content providers make runs into the millions.

They bombard handphone users with unsolicited downloads and SMS, such as ringtone offers. Whether one accepts the downloads or cancels them, a fee is charged.

The National Consumer Complaints Centre (NCCC) and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), the regulator of the telecommunications industry, say the money lost by consumers could amount to millions. NCCC manager Darshan Singh said most consumers did not complain because the cost of an unsolicited download was RM3 while sending a cancellation message cost just 15 sen.

"They simply don't want to go through the hassle of obtaining refunds.

"But imagine how much money these telecommunication companies (telcos) and content providers make from all those who don't complain. This happens mostly to prepaid users and they don't usually check their balance every time," he said.

MCMC corporate communications head Adelina Iskandar said: "Even if half the number of prepaid users do not complain when they receive unsolicited services because they don't want to go through the hassle just for a few sen or ringgit, it could mean a big sum for the content providers."

At the end of last year, there were 20.5 million handphone users, 17.5 million of them prepaid users.

Telcos provide mobile phone access while content providers take care of content such as ringtones and updates. Sometimes, telcos also provide content.

Darshan said: "During the World Cup period there were 753 complaints against telcos, compared with 96 in May. Some customers received free match updates but many customers failed to realise they were charged 15 sen for cancelling the service, which was unsolicited in the first place. Just imagine the amount if one million people had cancelled it.

"When we brought it up to the MCMC, the company concerned agreed to refund the money, but who checks to see if this is done?"

The NCCC received 1,087 telecommunication industry-related complaints in 2005, and 1,403 complaints up to June this year. Most were about being charged for unsolicited downloads.

The Consumer Claims Tribunal heard 73 cases concerning telcos last year. Until August this year, another 93 cases had been filed.

Darshan claimed that when consumers who discovered their handphone credit was diminishing called the telcos, they were told telcos were not responsible for the actions of content providers.

"This is rubbish," Darshan said, adding that telcos provided access to these companies and should therefore be responsible for screening the content.

"They have records of the itemised billing and what SMS are being sent, so why don't they just play an active role in curbing this?" he asked.

Adelina said the MCMC was acting on the complaints.

She said a working group comprising telcos, the MCMC and content providers revised guidelines on the provision of mobile content and services in July.

The original guidelines were made in August last year.

"For example, if the consumer sends the 'Stop' message but the service still continues, or there is no reminder before a subscription is renewed, the telco can suspend the services of the content provider.

"In fact, one company has been suspended since June and may even be prosecuted in court," she said.

While handphone users see this as a good move, they hope it will not stop there.

They are not willing to be taken for a ride anymore