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Consumer Cellular serves AARP target audience -- now and in the future

By *Laurie Orlov*

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Last week we caught up with CEO of Consumer Cellular, John Marick, who talked about its now-nationwide service offering -- no contract service intended for the low-usage cell phone user. The firm went from being a small Northwest cell phone service reseller in the Northwest to becoming a national provider. Key to their offering:

- **Exclusive wireless provider for AARP members.** Following their success with the AAA automotive club business, in September, 2008, Consumer Cellular became a preferred provider for the AARP membership, giving them access to AARP's more than 40 million members in the 50+ age bracket. The offering included [1] AARP discounts on service and accessories. Now, no surprise, 80% of the reseller's customers fall into that age range.
- **No contract service, with emphasis on the service.** CEO Marick is proud of the firm's service orientation, saying that the company's goal was to "make a product that people were satisfied with and happy". Their focus is on service [2] -- and they are willing to be called. This would seem obvious in other industries -- but in the wireless business, with contract-based providers like Verizon and AT&T, users oddly are penalized with early termination charges [3].
- **Ability to reset plans before the end of the month.** Rates run from \$9.50 per month for non-users who carry the phone for emergencies up to \$57/month for 1600 minutes. Up until the end of the billing cycle, users can change plans if their usage goes over the estimated amount. Above the limits, the firm charges 10 cents/minute. If their usage goes way over, the customer service staff contacts them and encourages them to find another plan.
- **Senior-friendly and hearing-aid compatible phones.** Marick indicates that the Nokia and Motorola phones will be augmented by new models that are similar to their

best-selling Nokia 6085, with bigger buttons and bigger screens. This includes making the hand-sets are hearing-aid compatible with good ring tones -- and also working with manufacturers to provide even more senior-friendly handsets in the future.

- **Baby-boomer ready.** "We are trying to balance the needs of the marketplace today, but also plan for the future" says Marick. This means thinking about phones that baby boomers will want that can support them as they age, perhaps incorporating touch screens, voice activation, and ease of use. On their radar, phones with additional services -- like content, e-mail, and other apps. Says Marick: "as baby boomers get into the 65+ category, people will not be afraid of technology -- they will want a product that will be useful to them as they age."

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[1] <https://www.consumercellular.com/about/pr/pr105.aspx>

[2] <https://www.consumercellular.com/support/Default.aspx>

[3] <http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/electronics-computers/phones-mobile-devices/phones/cell-phone-service-providers/cell-phone-service-1-08/overview/cell-service-ov.htm>