

Outsmarting Your Cellphone

By CHRISTOPHER RHOADS

A few years ago when he was a graduate student in Washington, Pinakin Dinesh used to grow frustrated when he traveled home to India on vacation and couldn't use his U.S. cellphone.

As is common among U.S. carriers, his carrier had locked his cellphone, meaning that it would work only with that network. "I went to India and England a lot, and I would have to carry three phones," says Mr. Dinesh, 29 years old. "Why carry three phones?"

Mr. Dinesh decided to do something about it. In 2002, he founded a company from his Arlington, Va., apartment that, for a fee, decodes locked cellphones that use the so-called GSM standard, enabling them to work with other GSM carriers.

His service is in such demand—for fees ranging from \$5 to \$60 depending on the complexity of the cellphone—that last year he had to move his company, Mofware LLC, from his apartment into offices and a nearby warehouse. He now has 70 employees, including 15 in a call center in India, he says.

"Carriers try to bully you," says Mr. Dinesh. "But you own the device, and you should be able to use it anywhere you want."

Mr. Dinesh is but one combatant in an escalating war over control of the cellphone. As the devices become more like hand-held computers, offering a growing array of services ranging from taking and sending photos to accessing video and music, the stakes are becoming ever greater.

Not surprisingly, the carriers want to make these services fee-based. They argue that, for matters of security, these applications should come only through their networks.

On the other side, a growing group of users are rebelling against that control, believing that they should be allowed to use their handsets where and as they want—and as the manufacturers designed them.

On occasion, carriers request that manufacturers disable some functions of higher-end models so that the handsets mesh with the carriers' pricing and service plans. A lawsuit filed in December seeking class-action status alleges that Verizon Wireless disabled some of the wireless capabilities of a high-end cellphone, called the V710 and built by Motorola Inc. As a result, buyers of the handset received less than what they thought they had bought, the lawsuit says.

The weapons for rebellion are multiplying. For \$29.99 at RadioShack and other electronics stores, handset users can buy FutureDial Inc.'s SnapMedia software, which enables them to avoid the fee—typically between 25 cents and

40 cents—charged by carriers for transferring each photo from a camera phone. The software allows users to send photos from their phones to PCs, where they can be stored or e-mailed at no cost.

The software also appeals to users who want to keep their photos in the privacy of their phones or computers, rather than on a network operated by a carrier. Most carriers require that photos be uploaded to their networks before being sent elsewhere. FutureDial also sells directly to carriers, including Sprint Corp., which uses its software for synchronizing phone and address books, among other things.

"We are not taking any sides," says George Huang, the chief executive and chairman of FutureDial, Sunnyvale, Calif. "We just give users more choice."

Others have taken more extreme measures. Less than a week after the much-anticipated release last year by Sprint of



FutureDial software allows photos to be transferred directly to PC, avoiding "memory full" problem.

the high-end Treo 650, a cellphone buff with the screen-name "showmite" hacked the phone. The hacker figured out a way to allow the phone to be used as a wireless modem to connect a computer to the Internet, something that "showmite" said on his Web site the phone was originally designed to do.

Sprint didn't provide that capability on the model because certain components weren't ready for the market, a Sprint spokeswoman says, but the company rolled out the cellphone anyway because it didn't want to delay its launch. That feature will be available later this year, she says. "Using unauthorized third-party fixes may cause unforeseen problems, and Sprint wouldn't be responsible for trying to fix them," says Amy Schiska-Lombard, the spokeswoman for Sprint, Overland Park, Kan.

Nonetheless, Mr. Dinesh of Mofware says he is developing software that will allow the Treo 650 to work on a wireless hotspot, known as Wi-Fi.