

Be Mindful of Unexpected Mobile Data Service Charges While Roaming Overseas

Nowadays more and more consumers use mobile data roaming service when traveling abroad. As roaming charges are much higher than domestic rates, consumers may incur exorbitant data roaming charges as a result of inadvertent use of the data roaming service. This has fast become a subject of concern.

In order that consumers may avoid unnecessary billing disputes with their mobile service operators and financial loss, further to our publication of a general consumer alert on use of mobile data services (http://www.ofta.gov.hk/en/c_alert/c_alert_20100212.pdf) in February 2010, we are issuing this consumer alert to provide the public with tips on smart use of mobile data roaming services.

Use of Mobile Data Services while Roaming Overseas

How will Mobile Data Services be Triggered?

In general, mobile data services (for both local and roaming services) can be activated by web browsing and usage of certain software applications on your mobile handset. Examples are sending and receiving e-mails, using instant messaging, visiting websites for social networking and video streaming. If you use a notebook computer equipped with mobile data modem outside Hong Kong, you may also trigger the usage of mobile data roaming service.

Measures to Avoid Unexpected Mobile Data Roaming Charges

To avoid unexpected mobile data roaming charges, you are advised to adopt the following measures if you need to use mobile data roaming service while traveling abroad:-

General Advice

- Before you leave Hong Kong, please check your mobile service operator's website or contact their customer service centre to obtain information on:
 1. The availability of mobile data service in the destination;
 2. The roaming partners available in the destination
 - as different roaming partners may impose different service charges, you may choose the network(s) which best suit(s) your need
 - please make sure that you are always logged onto the network(s) that you have chosen, otherwise additional charges may be incurred;

3. Charging method and associated charges

- whether the mobile data roaming service is charged on a monthly, daily or consumption basis.

- Switch off the automatic update functions for emails, Really Simple Syndication (“RSS”), Podcast and other softwares (commonly known as “Apps”) before departing from Hong Kong in order to avoid unnecessary mobile data service charges.
- You may also consider replacing your mobile phone SIM card with a local prepaid SIM card of the destination for data services. This will help cap the data service charges within the value of the prepaid SIM card.

Charge-capped Data Usage Service Plan

Some mobile service operators are providing customers with a day pass i.e. a flat-rate data roaming daily plan (typically less than HK\$200 per day) for data usage in certain destinations. You should take note that most of these charge-capped data usage packages (or discount rates) are **only applicable to designated destination(s) and/or network(s)**. Thus, you should ensure that the daily pass purchased applies to the destination and you are always logged onto the designated network(s) in the destination. Otherwise, regular data roaming charges which are at a much higher level will be incurred.

Furthermore, if your handset is configured to “automatic” network selection, you may encounter the problem of “network switching”. This will occur when the signals of the connected network has become weakened. Your handset will then be connected to other non-designated networks which have stronger signals. To avoid additional data roaming charges arising from such “network switching”, you should configure your handset to manual network selection so that the connection will be confined only to the designated network(s). The manual network selection procedures may vary with different handset models. In general, you may follow the steps below:

1. Go to the “Setting” menu.
2. Select the “Operator” or “Network” sub-menu.
3. Choose ‘Manual Network’ selection to select your designated network.
4. Save the designated network selection in your mobile phone.
5. Ensure that you have successfully logged onto your designated network.

If you choose to use a day pass, you should beware of the service activation and cut-off time. In general, the service will be activated only after confirmation has been made by the customers via a short message upon arrival at the destination. You therefore need to clarify with your service operators whether the service will be activated immediately or after a lapse of time upon making the confirmation.

The definition of “a day” may also vary. “A day” may be counted based on the local time (00:00 – 23:59) of Hong Kong, or that of the destination. The daily charges may also be counted on per destination basis. For example, if you use mobile data service in the United Kingdom in the morning, then you travel to France in the afternoon, you will be charged twice for traveling in the two countries in the same day. To avoid unnecessary disputes, consumers must clarify with their service operators how the charges are calculated.

Mobile Data Roaming Services not Required while Traveling Abroad

If you don't foresee that you require mobile data roaming services while traveling abroad, you may deactivate the mobile data roaming feature using any of the following methods:-

- Request your operator to deactivate the roaming privilege for your mobile data services. This can generally be done while keeping your roaming privilege for voice call services;
- Some mobile service operators have set up a pair of short codes to let you turn on/off the mobile data service at any time. You may consider temporarily turning off the mobile data services while you are traveling overseas. If short codes are not available, most operators are willing to entertain the request of customers to temporarily deactivate the mobile data service, while maintaining voice roaming service; and
- Configure your handset to disable data service while roaming outside Hong Kong (please note that this feature is only available on certain handset models).

In general, in order to avoid unnecessary financial loss and billing disputes, you should carefully enquire about the service details and charging scheme, and read the service terms and conditions before subscribing to mobile data roaming services. In case of any doubt, please approach your mobile service operator for assistance before departing from Hong Kong.

Updated on 9 November 2011