

Do Packets Put Holes in your Pocket?

By Tracey Northcott

Remember when mobile phones were as large as a house brick, cost a month's salary to buy and the GDP of a small African country to maintain? Now with carrier subsidies on handsets, a mature cellular network and economies of scale, the cost of voice calls on slim, multi-functional camera phones are similar to those on landlines. But what about all the other features available from these sexy mobile devices: sending photos, e-mails and my personal fave, mobile-friendly web-sites that offer everything from barcoding to banking. 24/7 mobile access to a whole new world of information is not as expensive or as difficult as you might think.

Most Japanese users know the benefits of using their mobile phones as their first port of call to the Internet and for many people, this is their main Internet contact. Those of us from mobile technologically challenged countries (pretty much everywhere but Korea and Hong Kong it seems) think of mobile phones as devices primarily for, you know, making phone calls. With good cause - until recently, most of the services and many of the handset functions have only been shown in Japanese - not user-friendly for the JSL or non-native Japanese speaker. Bilingual services are more common recently so it is a good time as any to investigate how this technology can benefit your daily life.

Time for an Upgrade?

You may look at upgrading your phone to enjoy the seemingly endless new features - want to start using a mega-pixel camera, download and play MP3's while on your daily commute, keep your business and personal life in order, improve your Japanese with a daily study program? Short of making you a coffee or taking out the trash, recently released bilingual handsets can do almost everything. There is so much more out there than games and ring-tones.

But will the packet fees blow the budget? They don't have to.

Over the last 18 months, fierce competition between the carriers has led to lower prices and better monthly plans. If you stay with the same carrier it usually costs nothing to switch plans at any time. Remember that the cheapest base plan on paper may not actually be the cheapest option overall so it pays to do some homework.

Your first stop should be with your carrier to make sure you have the best plan for your lifestyle and your current handset. You can do this research very easily on-line at the carriers' web-sites.

NTT DoCoMo <http://www.nttdocomo.co.jp/english>

Vodafone <http://www.vodafone.jp/english>

EZWeb <http://www.au.kddi.com/english>

If you're still bewildered, visit one of the larger branded stores. The staff are always helpful and there is often someone on staff who has good English.

They will look at your voice and packet use over the months and often recommend a better priced plan.

What are Packet Fees? All of the carriers in Japan use packet transmission charging for non-voice activities. Every time you send/receive an e-mail, download a game, search for the closest Italian restaurant or the time of the last train, you incur packet fees. Packet communication charges are calculated according to the number of packets transmitted (1 packet = 128 bytes), and NOT the time you spend on-line. Downloading heavy graphics or music files or sending/receiving lots of photos via e-mail will use more packets than just text so you could be in for a nasty surprise at the end of the month if you are not careful.

Due to competitive pressure, all the Japanese carriers now offer a "Packet-Houdai" plan for newer handsets. As the name playfully puns, this is an "all-you-can-eat" packet plan. For a flat monthly rate, you can surf mobile sites, send photos, stream music or video to your heart's content. Each carrier has slightly different terms and conditions such as compatible handsets and accompanying voice plans so it is best to consult their web-site or speak to a customer service agent.

Tricks and Tips

For those without a "Packet-Houdai" plan, there are quite a few sneaky tricks-of-the-trade to reduce your monthly bill but still benefit from the multitude of mobile content sites on the official menus and non-official sites, called "katte" sites.

1. Only visit sites that are designed for viewing on a mobile phone. These are under the main menu of your handset. All carriers offer a menu of English sites - usually found when you scroll to the end of the Japanese top page.

Theoretically, you can input any valid URL into your phone, but if the site is not designed to reformat the content for a small screen, you will be paying for a whole heap of graphics that are probably not compatible with your phone anyway. The range of services available on mobile sites is as extensive as the desktop Internet so find the menu and let your fingers do the walking. You won't even have to input the URLs. There are tens of thousands of mobile sites in the menus. Many Japan-centric Internet sites have a mobile component and the savvy sites have automatic mail links to send the URL to your phone.

2. Avoid using sites that use heavy graphics in their title banners. Text based sites are the cheapest to use. Look for sites that allow you to chose a "minimal graphics" mode in the user settings. If a site provides a service, the output is what you want rather than looking at a pretty picture that you have to pay for every time.

3. Use bookmarks instead of browsing through menus to take you to favourite sites quickly and cheaply. Better yet, use the "Screen Memo" function available from the menu of most handsets. This saves the pages that you use frequently in

the memory of the phone. It is only when you click on the links of the saved page that you start to incur fees. Check the manual of your handset for full instructions on this secret money saving feature.

Official Sites

Many sites on the official menus are subscription services. For a few hundred yen a month, you have access to full services like banking, translation, horoscopes, news feeds, fortune telling and of course games and ring-tones. You will be amazed at the value these sites add to your daily routine and wonder how you ever survived in Japan without them. To register, you will need to follow a set of simple instructions and you will be asked for a PIN number. This PIN number gives permission for the subscription fee to be added to your phone bill.

These subscription fees are a small cost compared to the packets, so if you take the precautions listed above you will not need to take a second job to pay your phone bills.

About the Author: Tracey Northcott is Vice President of Enfour, Inc. - a Tokyo based mobile contents solution provider. Enfour's "TangoTown" is one of the original and most popular English mobile sites on all three Japanese mobile networks and offers user-friendly and sophisticated Japanese language reference and learning materials. For more information, please see <http://tangotown.jp>