

Stretch Your Wireless Data Plan Instead of Paying More

By
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Last month I got the dreaded text message: “You’ve used about 90% of your data. Extra data for this cycle is \$15 per 1GB.”

Here’s what that message should’ve said: “You’re going overboard on the Snapchat and **Facebook FB 0.34 %** video, gigabyte guzzler! Turn on data savings in those apps or you’ll be mortgaging your house to keep paying our bills. Most of us skirt just under our monthly data allowances, although plenty of poor souls pay that overage charge. In 2015’s last quarter, 28% of **AT&T T 0.36 %** customers and 20% of **Verizon VZ 1.17 %** customers paid overages, a report by Cowen and Co. found.

You don’t have to be a telecom expert to figure out what’s happened. Bigger, more powerful smartphones and video-heavy websites and social media feeds have us chewing through more data than ever. And it’s getting worse. Today, U.S. smartphones use 3 to 4 gigabytes a month. By 2019, according to Ericsson, they will consume five times that. We can only pray the data caps won’t be so draconian then. But today gigabytes are more precious than gold. Still, you can save data within your current plan by making small adjustments. Welcome to my three-step Data Diet—no scales required.

Step 1: Curb your apps

Hunting Down the Data Hogs

Carriers sell you plans in gigabytes (GB), each equal to 1,000 megabytes (MB). Here’s how many MB were used in 30 minutes of the following activities during a recent test:



27 MB

30 minutes
of stream-
ing music at
auto quality



68 MB

30 minutes
of video
calling



87 MB

30 minutes
of scrolling
with auto-
play video



358 MB

30 minutes
of streaming
video

Note: Tests conducted on an iPhone 6s in the same location with a strong Verizon LTE signal.

What we really need are data usage alerts from the apps themselves. But maybe that's like Nabisco telling you to cut back on the Oreos. Until then, you need to keep an eye on your phone OS's overall data meter. In Settings—under Cellular for iOS, Data Usage for Android—you can see how much cellular data each app has used.

Android offers the superior tool. Input the dates of your billing cycle and it automatically clears the meter when the next cycle begins. On the iPhone you have to manually reset it. Of course, you can just use your carrier's apps, which provide a breakout of data use for the current billing period for all devices, but not a breakdown of specific app usage.

I discovered that Snapchat, Facebook, [Twitter TWTR 9.22 %](#) and Safari are my biggest data hoovers. But just because they're bankrupting me doesn't mean I'm going to use them less. Instead, I've disabled cellular use of more data-intensive features—especially video playback. ([Live video in particular is a huge data suck.](#))

In Facebook and Twitter, I disabled auto-playing videos on mobile. In Snapchat, I enabled Travel Mode, so it won't automatically download video and photos in new stories from people I follow. Many popular apps offer similar settings.

Stanching the flow in a browser is harder. Google's Chrome and Opera's Mini mobile browsers have a data saver mode to compress images and video, but Apple's Safari doesn't. It's a shame, since the savings can be significant.

A website that used 5MB to load in Safari took half as much data to load in Opera Mini and Chrome with data saving enabled. Instead of loading the entire site, they load portions of it while decreasing photo quality. You can reduce the load of websites in Safari, too, by using a content blocker like Purify. But that requires an additional app—and an [ethical debate about ad blocking](#).

Data saving is even more noticeable with video. A three-minute HD video in Safari used 64MB. On Opera Mini, Video Boost reduced it to 23MB. Sure, the compressed video was VHS-quality, but I don't need IMAX to catch up on news. Dedicated compression apps like Onavo Extend and Opera Max do something similar, but they slowed down my phones.

Chrome's Data Saver is for Android phones only. (A recent Chrome update disabled the feature for iPhones; Google hopes it will work again soon.) Opera Mini's features do work on iPhones, but you still can't disable Safari from being the phone's default browser. Some apps let you use other browsers, but most automatically launch Safari when you tap a link.

Step 2: Exploit carrier insecurity

Those annoying carrier ads, which might as well claim one horse and buggy is faster than another, reveal something great: These companies are desperate to keep you. Take advantage of all they offer—or consider switching.

Verizon has been running a series of promotional data giveaways. The latest? If you sign up for its [Gogo app](#), you'll automatically get an extra 2GB of data for the next three months. Last week, when my spouse called to ask for a bit more data, they gave us 1GB of "Bonus Data" for the year. My colleague has had similar luck getting a gig or two at AT&T. Just call or stop by.

The Video Squeeze

T-Mobile's new Binge On setting, on by default, compresses video to 480p. Compare it with the same HD video streamed—at substantially greater data cost—over Verizon. The picture isn't quite as rich, but it's more than adequate. Both screenshots are from the iPhone 6s.

It's an effort to keep us from switching to T-Mobile, which has [surged in subscribers](#) after an overhaul of the traditional carrier model: It cut prices, eliminated penalizing overages and offers unmetered music streams and

international calls. [Struggling Sprint S 6.27 %](#) now entices switchers with data plans for half of T-Mobile's going rates and is also dumping overage charges. Of course, when deciding to switch, service quality should be your first priority.

But at T-Mobile, a data plan still goes further than most. In addition to its Music Freedom service—which lets you stream from Spotify, Apple Music and other popular services without eating into your data—it recently added [Binge On](#).

[Though controversial](#) for not being opt-in, Binge On scales all video down to 480p DVD resolution to save data. Streaming a five-minute clip on the “Saturday Night Live” website used 40MB of data on T-Mobile. On Verizon, it took 60MB. Here's the crazier part: With a qualifying plan, you can watch unlimited [Netflix, NFLX 2.39 %](#) Hulu and other supported video services without eating into your data. Yes, even all 10 seasons of “Friends.”

Step 3: Embrace public Wi-Fi

Maybe you've heard of so-called unlimited plans offered by Sprint, T-Mobile and (in some cases) AT&T. They're not always the best value, and despite the name, your speeds can be slowed when you hit a certain amount. For real peace of mind, you're going to want Wi-Fi.

Wi-Fi might be obvious, but the fact that you may already pay for widely available public Wi-Fi is not. For instance, I've always ignored the “TWC-WiFi” network I see in various places, but it turns out, as a [Time Warner Cable TWC 2.56 %](#) subscriber, I have access to over 500,000 of them.

Time Warner uses a new [technology called Passpoint](#) to automatically—and securely—log me in when I'm in range. No need to punch in username and password. It was easy to set up and now I'm pleasantly surprised to find my phone connected to Wi-Fi, even when I'm out walking the dog.

Many cable providers, including [Comcast CMCSA 1.02 %](#)'s Xfinity and Cablevision's Optimum, offer similar options. If you don't have one of those, it may be worth subscribing to a stand-alone Wi-Fi service. [Boingo WIFI 1.90 %](#)'s \$10-a-month service buys you access to thousands of hot spots around the world, including Time Warner's. (That's the cost of an extra GB or two on your cell plan.) There's also free public Wi-Fi, which you can find with Wi-Fi Map for iOS and Android—just remember to take [proper security precautions](#) before connecting.

The thing is, even your cellular carrier wants you to use Wi-Fi, because it lessens network strain. That's why AT&T and Google alike are expanding their Wi-Fi footprint, some of which will use Passpoint.

Combining Wi-Fi and cellular is the best of both worlds. You can watch HD video for hours, and still avoid those cranky data-cap text messages.