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You know the drill - those annoying recorded calls saying you've won a free cruise or a reduction in your mortgage payment. You curse the automated voice, hang up and add the number to your blocked caller list. But they keep on coming.

In July, there were 2.42 billion robocalls in the U.S., almost triple from a year earlier, according to the YouMail Robocall Index, which tracks mostly mobile-phone users. They are the No. 1 consumer complaint received by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, topping 200,000 a year. Many of the calls are tied to criminal activity as they attempt to extract personal information to steal identities and money.

The government's 13-year-old Do Not Call Registry used to help, but the bad guys have outsmarted the system, often by originating the calls outside the U.S. and routing them so they appear to be from inside the country. Now, a variety of tools to combat robocalls is gaining traction and telecom companies and the FCC are taking notice as they try to gain the upper hand.

Adopting call-blocking technology should benefit carriers, even if the expenses involved aren't passed on to consumers, according to Chetan Sharma, an independent wireless industry analyst.

"It is just the cost of doing business and does help with customer loyalty and churn prevention," Sharma said, referring to the term for users who drop service. The only losers will be "the scam artists who prey on the unsuspecting and the elderly," he said.

One tool called Nomorobo is already used by a few providers including Time Warner Cable. The software scans incoming landline calls and compares

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BCAP offices will be closed Monday, September 5

them against its robocaller database, which adds about 1,100 numbers a day. Nomorobo recently blocked more than 670,000 calls in a single day, founder Aaron Foss said in an interview.

Telephone Science Corp., the company behind the software, is now testing a wireless robocall catcher, and will release its first iOS app in September, said Foss, who in 2013 won \$25,000 in the Federal Trade Commission's challenge to find solutions to block illegal calls.

Primus Telecommunications, a Canadian carrier and cloud-services provider that serves 250,000 businesses and consumers, has been successfully battling robocalls since 2007, said general manager Brad Fisher. Its technology intercepts calls before the customer's phone rings, then identifies the caller and gives the customer a choice to accept or reject or send to voice-mail. It also asks callers to dial a digit -- something robocallers can't do -- and identify themselves., and has intercepted 80 million calls, Fisher said in an interview.

The company, acquired in April by Atlanta-based Birch Communications Inc., has held preliminary talks with some U.S. carriers about using its technology, Fisher said. He declined to name any.

Apple will let iOS 10 developers use its CallKit framework, which improves call blocking and caller identification. This summer, Google released a new version of its spam-fighting app for Nexus and Android One devices, which checks incoming numbers against a database and flags suspicious numbers.

"It's clear that the technology is out there to address the robocall problem," said Maureen Mahoney, a public policy fellow at Consumers Union, which has collected more than 630,000 signatures on a petition to stop robocalls. "Consumers have had enough."

At least two bills has been introduced in Congress this year mandating blocking technology to curb the calls, and FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler sent letters to carriers last month urging them to offer call-blocking services at no cost to consumers and to accelerate development of standards to make the technology more effective.

Now, for the first time, phone hardware and software makers have banded together with carriers to tackle the problem. Earlier this month, the FCC hosted the first meeting of the Robocall Strike Force, whose chairman is AT&T Chief Executive Officer Randall Stephenson. More than 30 companies including Apple, Google, Verizon Communications and Comcast have pledged to develop an action plan by Oct. 19 that includes driving adoption of call-blocking technologies and standards. The group also will look at how to reduce "spoofing" -- when an overseas call center pretends to be a U.S.-based caller by routing through multiple carriers.

"So far we've been coming at this problem piecemeal and I think we can demonstrate we've had very limited success," Stephenson said at the meeting. The strike force will take a different approach "to deal with this with the entire ecosystem working together," he said.

The group plans to meet twice a week. Verizon "is committed to working with other stakeholders on the Strike Force to advance industry collaboration to address the problem," according to a statement. Apple declined to comment

for the story and Google didn't return a request for comment.

Separately, in the next few months a technology will be standardized that lets a carrier effectively sign each call originating on its network, said Henning Schulzrinne, a professor at Columbia University and technology adviser at the FCC. That should help curb spoofing, he said.

Eradicating robocalls will be expensive for some, said Joe Hoffman, an analyst at ABI Research. Some carriers may need to replace their oldest switches, those from vendors that are no longer in business, in order to upgrade their software. The costs likely won't result in any extra revenue, as most robocall blockers are offered for free, he said.

"One thing we'd really like to see is the carriers offering tools to consumers as soon as possible," said Mahoney at Consumers Union. "We are going to keep pushing the phone companies and the task force to see that that will happen." – ***Sun Sentinel***



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