

SFGate.com

[Return to regular view](#)[Print This Article](#)

## [Coming to terms with SBC](#)

- [David Lazarus](#)

Friday, December 16, 2005

Millions of SBC Yahoo Internet customers received e-mails this week alerting them to changes in their contract, including "legal and billing-related issues."

A link from the e-mail to SBC Yahoo's terms of service produces a nearly 14,000-word document jam-packed with fine print and legalese. There's no indication anywhere as to what may or may not be new.

This was a red flag for numerous SBC Yahoo customers, who contacted me wanting to know whether they should be concerned.

They shouldn't be (unless, as you'll see, they're members of al Qaeda). But SBC Yahoo gets no points for helping people understand this for themselves.

I started my hunt for answers by doing what many SBC Yahoo customers would do: I initiated an online chat with the customer-service department, which is in India.

The first person who came on the line identified himself as Dion Watt. After considerable backing-and-forthing about what I was contacting him about, Dion said he knew nothing about any changes to the terms of service.

So I tried again, this time entering into a chat with "Henry Gilbert." He, too, had no idea what I was talking about.

So I tried again, this time reaching "Nelson Wright." He concluded that the e-mail from SBC Yahoo wasn't legit.

"A lot of members are reporting this issue," Nelson wrote. "However, this e-mail seems to be spam as the e-mail address in the From field is not a SBC e-mail address."

The address in the From field is [directmail@yahoo-inc.com](mailto:directmail@yahoo-inc.com).

I informed Nelson that the e-mail doesn't seem to be a phishing scam. It's not asking anyone to submit personal info. In fact, it specifically states that no action from the recipient is required.

"Your continued use of SBC Yahoo services constitutes your acceptance of these changes to the SBC Yahoo terms of service," the e-mail says.

**4.0%**  
ANNUAL PERCENTAGE YIELD  
**America's Highest Savings Rate™**  
**Just Got Higher!**  
**EmigrantDirect.com™**  
More money for your money.™  
Member FDIC [Learn More ▶](#)

Nelson replied that he couldn't help me.

So I tried yet again, this time reaching "Vandy Bennett." He, too, said he knew nothing about any change to the terms of service and, therefore, the e-mail must be bogus.

"This is a hoax e-mail," Vandy wrote. "So I request you not to follow any instructions given in it. Please delete this e-mail message."

Just to be sure, I phoned SBC Yahoo's customer-service line at (877) 722-3755. I was eventually connected with a service rep who identified himself as Matthew. He was also in India.

Matthew insisted that there haven't been any changes to SBC Yahoo's terms of service. If there were, he pointed out, he'd know about them.

"It seems like spam," he said. "You don't have to worry about this. There have been no changes to the terms of service."

Wrong.

"It's not spam," said Nicole Leverich, a spokeswoman for Yahoo, which shares responsibility with SBC (now AT&T) for the terms of service. "It's real."

Similarly, AT&T spokesman John Britton said that not only is the e-mail legitimate, and not only were changes indeed made to the terms of service, but the e-mail was in fact sent to all of SBC Yahoo's 6.5 million Internet customers.

So how come the service reps in India were never informed?

"I don't know," Britton admitted. "We do our best to make sure that every representative of this company gives accurate information. We're doing our best to make sure that they're giving out the right information."

The crossed wires at customer service are just one example of how poorly this contract update was rolled out.

Another is that when people clicked on the link to the new terms of service in the original e-mail, they ended up, because of a glitch, seeing the old terms instead (although few would have been able to tell the difference).

"We're really sorry about that," said Yahoo's Leverich, who took responsibility for the technical snafu. She said a new-and-improved link was included in a second e-mail sent to many customers later in the week.

Leverich said the changes in the terms of service were mostly intended to make the SBC Yahoo document more in line with Yahoo's customer contract.

One of the more noteworthy changes is a warning, deep in the SBC Yahoo terms of service, that "a small percentage of users may experience epileptic seizures when exposed to certain light patterns or backgrounds on a computer screen or while using the service."

It instructs customers to consult a doctor if they experience any of the following symptoms while using SBC Yahoo: dizziness, altered vision, eye or muscle twitches, loss of awareness, disorientation, involuntary movements or convulsions.

In the "member conduct" section, another new addition specifies that SBC Yahoo subscribers may not provide assistance "to any organization designated by the United States government as a foreign terrorist organization."

If you engage in acts of terrorism, Leverich warned, "we could terminate your service." (Take that, Osama.)

As for SBC/AT&T, most of the changes involve a reshuffling of clauses -- I know because I did a line-by-line comparison with the old terms -- and new language affecting legal and billing matters.

For example, AT&T's Britton said the word "cancel" was changed throughout the document to "terminate" to better reflect that a customer's service could be cut off by the company if the terms of service are violated.

Perhaps the most significant change from SBC/AT&T's perspective is the addition of multiple references to something called "high-speed Internet U-verse enabled service."

Britton acknowledged that this refers to what AT&T otherwise is calling Project Lightspeed, a superfast, video-ready connection that will be made available to about 18 million households nationwide by the middle of 2008.

Project Lightspeed is intended to position AT&T as a head-to-head competitor with cable providers like Comcast.

Britton was reluctant to discuss details of Project Lightspeed, or how the advent of "high-speed Internet U-verse enabled service" will affect current DSL customers.

But he suggested that at least some DSL customers can expect to be switched to faster U-verse connections at some point.

"When the time comes, we will be transferring some customers from DSL," Britton said. He declined to say whether U-verse connections will come with higher prices or will cost the same as DSL lines.

Anyone with questions about Project Lightspeed should feel free to contact SBC Yahoo customer service. The guys in India will probably find out about it any day now.

*David Lazarus' column appears Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. Send tips or feedback to [dlazarus@sfgchronicle.com](mailto:dlazarus@sfgchronicle.com).*

Page C - 1

URL: <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2005/12/16/BUGN8G8SG21.DTL>

---

©2006 San Francisco Chronicle

