



## Good Morning! Saturday May 12, 107

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### Trapped in the GSM mesh

Lagosians lose N12b annually to phone thieves

By Emmanuel Mayah

**Saturday, May 12, 2007**

Three visits to a GSM office to restore lost phone lines were enough eye opener to IKENNA EMEWU to commence an investigation into what colossal loss Lagosians and Nigerians incur in the hands of handset thieves just because the service providers have refused to provide services that would discourage phone theft.



•Ernest

•Photo: SUNNEWS PUBLISHING

Pause a second as you read this story and do a little assignment.

Take a mental stock of how many cell phones or handsets you have lost since you joined the GSM rave. Better still, cast your mind back to the number of times your friends, parents, children, colleagues and associates came around sulking, brooding, panting or raking about a loss of handset.

What about those times you made vain efforts to reach the other person over something very urgent and was told to your chagrin that 'the number you have called is not available at the moment' or '... cannot be reached', or '...is switched off'. You wondered why on earth the GSM providers won't stop telling lies in the name of default response.

But at last when you finally get a call, the one you have been trying to reach would explain that just five minutes after the last contact, his/her phone was stolen.

It is true the GSM has been a source of livelihood. it has done many good things to Nigerians as per communication. But it has regrettably also bred another form of illicit business of phone theft – an aspect of the benefits of the GSM the inventors never contemplated at commencement. Many have never taken even a cursory notice of the loss Nigerians incur through this new-found vocation of pick-pockets, pilferers, robbers and also kleptos.

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Sometimes these handsets are lost at the most unusual places – churches, mosques, and cemeteries. Funnily enough, one of the persons Saturday Sun sounded out, lost his set inside Aso Rock. It was before a gathering summoned by Mr. President himself. As the press reporter was squeezing through some security men before the President, his handset took a flight and has not been found years after. Weddings are also good breeding grounds for handset theft.

### A hunch – and a new find

This reporter was at the MTN office at Berger Cement Bus Stop – Apapa area of Lagos in February, at the second week precisely, to restore a stolen phone line. The line had been with him for five years until that fateful Sunday when it fell into strange hands. It began like a harmless joke that day when the phone was discovered unavailable. After a call, it was picked by a woman who roared: “If you need your phone, you should come to Oshodi bus stop, where Ikotun buses load. Bring me N10,000 and have it back’. I knew it was a lost battle. The only option left was to block the line as we say it.

The real shock came when on getting to the MTN office, a crowd was there, and on getting a form to fill and queue up for my turn, it was found out that the serial number was 82. That meant I was the 82nd person that needed the recovery of a lost line that day. About six weeks later, the reporter’s wife’s phone also fell into the hands of the same thieves, and another need arose to do another recovery. On the first day of attempt at the same Berger Cement office, the crowd was worse. The number of the form as at 11.00am was 123. To wait was impossible that day. It had to be postponed with an intention to sway Madam’s opinion to go for a new line. But at last there was no option but a repeat attempt.

The next day, which was the third in the same place saw a worse crowd. The number was 132. The gathering was so scary that one had to zoom off to buy a handset and come back an hour and a half later to discover it was my turn. The interlude to pick a new handset was like an appetizer as the real wait still took another one hour. At last, the number was restored at a fee of N380. The N20 balance never got to me as the lady in attendance did not see it proper to call me back for it as I left immediately. The first recovery had taken a fee of N580, inclusive of a N200 compulsory recharge card. By the time this waiting was on, people kept trooping in for the same service. It was then this hunch came to take real inventory of what Lagosians lose daily, monthly and annually to phone thieves and how much it benefits the GSM service providers. A closer observation had to be made on the number on the forms the new entrants pick. As at the time Saturday Sun left this office, the last form so far picked had number 181 on it. The time was 3.47 pm and the stream of lost phone victims had not run dry.

### At the Celtel office

Because an idea to do a thorough report on this unfortunate trend had clicked, there was the need to visit other GSM service providers’

offices. Twice, Saturday Sun visited Adeniran Ogunsanya where a greater percentage of the GSM providers have offices. On the first day of visit, Saturday Sun reporter's number at the Celtel office was 56. It was about 10.00am. On the second day of visit – May 7, the visit was intentionally delayed till 11.00 at which time the serial number on a piece of paper allocated to me was 117. It was on a Monday. An inquiry about the cost of restoration of the number revealed that each victim pays N500 to Celtel.

On sauntering into the waiting lounge, there was this great multitude of waiting Lagosians, mainly youths who spend productive hours to spend their money in a painful way after being victimized by the phone thief. Meanwhile, the next requirement in addition to the N500 service fee was the photocopy of a victim's ID card and that of the SIM certificate. All these take money to handle.

### **Welcome to Glo**

A certain uniformed security man on the first floor of the Glo office on Adeniran Ogunsanya on entry from the back of the building added an interesting drama to the whole painful game. Because the Glo officials never give number tags at entry point like the other two, one had to find a way of beating the odd. After scanning the entire hall, there were at least 30 youths waiting to be attended to. They were all seated, with some vacant seats of maybe a little less than the number occupied in anticipation of more victims.

A 21-inch TV was on, tuned on to LTV channel and Elton John was rolling out his popular tune. The youths stayed glued to the tube and maybe forgot the time they lost in that cosy airconditioned hall waiting to spend their money in an unjustified manner.

The TV issue is a popular trick that works for all these GSM service providers. At the MTN place, it is always Super Sports or Channel O. Celtel did not also miss that. So it was also in the Reltel office. Because they must be a way of ascertaining how much one coughs out to get the problem solved, I requested one of the security operatives at the Glo place to reveal the cost of line restoration, an information he was unwilling to oblige, insisting that I get the photocopies of my ID and SIM first.

But a trick later worked with another uniformed guy who jumped at the offer of having my credentials on procuring the photocopies while he handles the rest. It was a good bait when the man's eyes brightened on an inquiry regarding how much he would charge to handle the rest of the recovery for me as one had so much to do in the office for the day and couldn't wait. For this, he dropped a fee of N1500. A bid of N1000 was acceptable to him with a promise that I wanted to get the photocopies downstairs. The story was already in the kitty. While Saturday Sun lingered on this fact-finding bid, a scene caught my attention as I noticed a young man squeezing N600 – in N100 and N500 into the hands of the second uniformed man. From the vu interaction, it was clear the duo must be pals. He had made for the inner office where the real business of recovery goes on, and as the waiting youths kept shifting from one chair to the

other as their turns progressed to be attended to when one found his way out of the office. From the amount that changed hands for faster facilitation, it is likely Glo number recovery would be N500.

### **Reltel burden**

To recover your lost Reltel line entails extra burden. This takes the most cumbersome procedure. As Saturday Sun walked into the Reltel hall on the same Adeniran Ogunsanya and revealed the mission, a lady at the counter in the blue/orange office signalled another in the middle of a row of three ladies at her back to attend to me. The dark tall lady who later appeared to receive my complaint politely intoned her sympathy on hearing my story of losing a Reltel phone. As if she knew I felt like holding Reltel responsible for such incident she obligingly said 'I am sorry for that Sir'.

After her explanation, the effect of the 'sorry' dried up. She told me to go for a sworn affidavit, a police crime extract, ID card and N3000 to have the line back. That must be done only at the Iponri office.

### **Counting the cost**

From the findings at the MTN, Celtel and Glo offices, there are approximately 170 persons that come to an outlet everyday for line recovery. That means there are at least 850 in each office for the five working days of the week.

MTN has at least 12 outlets in Lagos where such business goes on and would amount to an average of 10,200 such recoveries for a week in all the outlets. Celtel, from very reliable facts has the largest number of customer service outlets. Maybe we should conservatively put the number at the same rate or say 9,500 per week in accordance with the volume of subscribers.

Glo is another heavyweight in the sector and should take the same ratio with MTN – it therefore has another 10, 200 recoveries per week. Other providers of less volume might altogether contribute a total of another 10,200 per week. That gives a grand total of at least 40, 000 losses and recoveries for Lagosians every week.

The cost of recovery in MTN hovers around N400 and would make a total loss of N4,080,000 in a week. The same amount is an income to the company. Celtel would take N4,750,000 at the number of lost lines per week. Glo, with all pride, will make N5,100,000 per week. With the recovery rate of the other lines which is almost the same amount needed to get a new line, it will be a staggering N30,600,000 per week.

### **Annual stock**

The figure might sound incredible because you never sat down to count the cost of this wasteful venture, but the reality is that GSM consumers/handset owners lose as much as N16,320,000 to MTN in a month or N195,840,000 per year. The rate lost to Celtel is N19,000,000 in a month or N228,000,000 per annum. Glo takes a lion share of N224,800,000 per year from lost lines or N20,400,000 in a month. The other service providers rake in an income of

N122,400,000 per month or N1,468,800,000 in a year.

The total sum lost to the handset thieves and the service providers by the hapless GSM consumer in Lagos per year is a whopping N2,137,440,000 (two billion, one hundred and thirty seven million, four hundred and forty thousand naira). This amount is just to recover lost lines.

### **What about lost handsets?**

There is no GSM user that recovers a lost line who carries the SIM about just that way. The logic is that a loss of line is a loss of handset. Since the other service providers apart from MTN, Glo and Celtel dispense lines with handsets, the area of concern is the amount of handsets lost in a week in the three major lines should be an estimated 30,000 per week. That amounts to 120,000 per month or 1,440,000 per year. If we should peg the cost of a handset at a paltry N7,000, that adds up to N10,080,000,000 (ten billion, eighty million naira)

In handsets and phone lines recovery/replacement, Lagosians lose N12,217,440,000 in a year.

Meanwhile, there are many private agencies and outlets that handle phone line recovery dotted all over the city of Lagos who act as fronts for the big service providers and the number of services they handle and the cost is harder to quantify.

### **Bringing the facts home**

Saturday Sun brought the scourge nearer home by sampling randomly the answers of 76 Lagosians out of which 31 have never lost any handset in any form. The other 45 have lost at least a handset. Out of the number, 17 have lost just one handset, 18 lost two and 10 lost more than two – a number, which hovered between three and five. Two highest losers had sacrificed five handsets each. Take a similar sampling around you as you read this and get a shocker for yourself on the discovery that would come your way.

### **Why service providers are culpable**

Nigerians are not stagnated people, as a result they are also familiar with other climes and also have ample knowledge of what happens in others.

Saturday Sun was told authoritatively by people who know that in most of the countries where GSM services are obtained, the service providers render handset blocking services, at no extra cost to users. With such service when a handset is stolen or taken away from the owner, it serves no use to the thief. Experts in the field also hinted that even the Nigerian GSM service providers have the same capacity to block handsets in wrong hands from use on reception of complaint of loss.

Such sources indict service providers for their refusal to give Nigerian GSM consumers such services partly because they benefit heavily from the loss as users pay them in billions to recover lost lines. Another group blames the NCC, the GSM telecom regulatory

agency for reneging on its powers and duties to compel the service providers to render this onerous service to the consumer.

The bottomline is that any handset thief who knows he/she is not going to make use of a handset will never steal it. Therefore, whenever the service providers decide to do the right thing and bar thieves from making capital of stolen handsets, the fad for its theft will fizzle out.

If the service providers will de-emphasize this profiteering game and do the proper thing, handset theft, the attendant monetary, life and other losses will be a thing of the past. Nigerians will plough the wasted time spent in GSM offices and other private outlets to recover lines in some other beneficial ventures for a better economy.

From daily news reports, hundreds of lives have been lost at the hands of reckless handset thieves who carelessly shoot and kill victims in the process of dispossessing them of their handsets. Any service provider that introduces this needful service will have an automatic edge over the market.

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