

# THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO SATELLITE AIRTIME BILLING

A buyer's guide for satellite service providers looking to improve their billing processes and systems



# CONTENTS

Introduction: How Satellite Airtime Billing Works .....	3
Investing In A Satellite Billing System .....	5
Your Current Billing Requirements .....	6
Your Satellite Operators And Services .....	8
Your Assets And Installations .....	8
Your Business Goals Over The Next 2 To 3 Years .....	9
What Satellite Billing Systems Are Available? .....	10
1) Spreadsheets/MS Excel .....	10
2) Custom Satellite Billing System .....	11
3) Specialist Satellite Airtime Billing Solutions .....	11
What To Look For In A Dedicated Airtime Billing Platform .....	12
SATbill: Our World-Class Satellite Airtime Billing Solution .....	13
SATbill: The Software .....	15
Advantages Of SATbill .....	16
Next Steps .....	17

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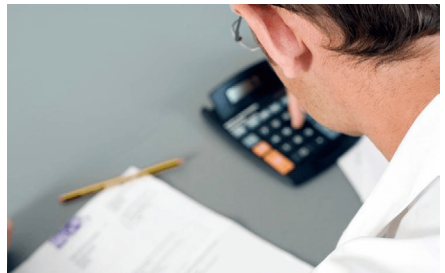
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# INTRODUCTION:

## HOW SATELLITE AIRTIME BILLING WORKS

A typical satellite airtime billing cycle is a complex, multistage process in which there is – unfortunately – plenty of scope for delays and human error. This is especially the case when billing is processed manually using spreadsheets. To create a customer invoice, the following stages are needed:

- » Manually upload the call data records (CDRs) in the file format received from the satellite operator(s)
- » Review the invoice for billing errors and omissions
- » Save the final invoice as a PDF, Word document or Excel spreadsheet
- » Email the invoice to your customer
- » Manually combine the different call charges, value-added services, tariffs, call plans, discounts, roaming charges, uplift fees and termination charges into a draft invoice. Sometimes more than one invoice is required if customers are on multiple tariffs, use more than one currency, or require different invoices for various VAT/tax jurisdictions
- » Manually configure a cost of sales and finance report from spreadsheet data



With so many variables in satellite airtime billing, invoicing can rapidly become extremely complex and time-consuming, and prone to billing mistakes and errors.

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# INTRODUCTION:

## HOW SATELLITE AIRTIME BILLING WORKS

The results of this are:

- ⊗ **Loss Of Productivity:** Staff resources are wasted on repetitive manual admin, fact checking and rectifying errors, rather than productive work.
- ⊗ **Poor Customer Service:** Customers reasonably expect fast and accurate invoicing from their service providers. Billing mistakes and errors damage your professional reputation, involve time-consuming and costly refunds and can, in serious cases, lead to litigation.
- ⊗ **Impact On Cash Flow:** Delays in the billing cycle and inaccurate invoices result in slowness in getting paid. In some circumstances this can mean that payments to your satellite operators become due before you receive reimbursement from your customers.
- ⊗ **Lack Of Visibility:** Without a clear and unified approach to reporting, it is very difficult to manage your margins, making it a struggle to set competitive pricing and respond to market challenges and opportunities.

This guide has been written for satellite communication service providers who are looking for a new and better way of managing their satellite airtime billing! In the sections that follow we explain the various types of satellite billing system, ideal features you should look for, and how to assess your business needs.

At Symbiosys, we offer a purpose-designed satellite billing solution called **SATbill**, developed in conjunction with market leading satellite operators and service providers to deliver fast and accurate billing. More information about SATbill can be found throughout this guide, and in the final section in particular. If you have any questions in the meantime, please give us a call +44 (0) 1260 281700, or email [info@symbiosys-bs.co.uk](mailto:info@symbiosys-bs.co.uk).

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# Investing In a Satellite Billing System



# INVESTING IN A SATELLITE BILLING SYSTEM

There are several types of satellite billing system available, so before you invest in a new solution it is worthwhile assessing your current business needs. This will act as a guide to the strengths and drawbacks of any systems you consider, and suggest the type of solution you might be looking for.

## Your Current Billing Requirements

Take a detailed inventory of your billing requirements and how your current system operates in practice – including the drawbacks leading you to consider a new system. Make a list of the technologies you use – i.e. spreadsheets or an in-house billing system etc. – how the billing system is managed, how many users access the system, and how often you run your billing cycle and generate customer invoices.

- » What is the layout of your invoices and in what document form are they currently provided, e.g. PDF, paper, email?
- » At what level are your invoices generated – at the customer level, per contract, per service type, or per item?
- » How many currencies do you use for invoicing, and which ones? Is one of these designated as a core currency for accounting purposes?



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- » Are customer payments made on a contracted, post-service basis, or pay in advance, or a combination of both for different services used by the same customer?
- » Are all your customers on the same invoice frequency, or does this vary? For instance, do some customers receive a quarterly invoice instead of monthly, or only receive a bill when a minimum invoice value is reached? Do your charges and tariffs differ for customers on different invoice arrangements?
- » How does your system generate customer codes, debtor codes, nominal codes and general ledger codes, and in what structure? How is this data passed to your finance system?
- » How does your system generate reports on revenue, costs and margins?
- » How do you calculate prices for each call type and non-call service? Do charges vary between different sources and satellite operators? How do you measure chargeable units – e.g. cost per minute, per kilobyte/megabyte/gigabyte of data? Do you charge a call-start fee or apply an uplift to incoming calls? Are there differences between peak and off-peak rates? Finally, do you apply minimum call charges or minimum call volumes, and for which services?
- » Do you offer your customers a choice of call plans and tariffs? Do these include call or data bundles, free minutes or discounts?
- » How do you process refunds and manual credit or debits?



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## Your Satellite Operators And Services

The more top-level satellite operators you use, and the more diverse the services from each, the more complicated your billing system becomes. When looking into different satellite billing systems, you want something that can easily handle services provided by different satellite operators, identify varying charges and data formats, and consolidate them into a unified invoice without excessive manual calculations and data entry. The complicating factor when working with multiple providers is the data structure received in different CDR formats, and the way in which they are received.

The following considerations will all influence the type of satellite billing system that is best for you:

- » How many CDRs and CDR files you receive per month/billing cycle
- » How many satellite operators you currently work with
- » How many customers and dealers are on your books
- » Your asset base – i.e. the total number of terminals, SIMs and other equipment
- » Mobile installations on ships and aircraft
- » The number of new terminals, contracts and services you add each month/billing cycle

## Your Assets And Installations

How do you track the usage of equipment owned by your business but used by customers remotely, including equipment installed on specific vessels and aircraft? In what format or formats do you receive data on airtime consumption, and in what frequency – e.g. weekly or monthly?

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## Your Business Goals Over The Next 2 To 3 Years

A satellite billing system, such as SATbill, should be set up to support the needs of your business, not only as they currently stand, but over the next 2 to 3 years. Jot down your plans in the following areas and use it as a benchmark to assess the suitability of any billing system:

- » Revenue goals, sales forecasts and cost indicators
- » New services, products and operational KPIs – e.g. market share, or time to market
- » Structural growth, including expansion of assets, countries of operation, new employees and supply chain partnerships
- » Investment in new IT and telecoms systems (especially relevant are planned investments in accounting, ERP and CRM platforms)
- » Projected trends in satellite technology and significant changes being proposed by your satellite operators
- » Potential risks to your market – e.g. economic downturns, supply chain vulnerability, changes in technology, consumer trends, viral epidemics etc.
- » Changes introduced by current competitors, and potential competitors entering the market over the next couple of years. How will your business differentiate and compete with these companies for the same market share?



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## What Satellite Billing Systems Are Available?

Broadly speaking there are three types of satellite billing system you can use; a manual, spreadsheet-based system, an in-house custom development, or a specialist platform such as SATbill. Let's look at each of these options in turn:

### 1) Spreadsheets/MS Excel

Excel spreadsheets are, in principle, more than capable of handling a satellite billing and invoicing system. However, the more complexities you introduce into your billing requirements (see the previous section above), the more difficult it is to accurately keep track of your billing, and the more time is required to operate your system.

Once your business has progressed beyond a certain size, or you begin working with multiple satellite operators, the negatives of working with Excel quickly outweigh its benefits. One of the major issues is that Excel requires experience and expertise to use its advanced features correctly – and most Excel users only have surface knowledge. This makes frequent and often serious mistakes inevitable.

The other problem is duplication of data. In a billing system in which multiple users update multiple spreadsheets on different shared drives, it's hard to keep track on who has done what. Information can easily become lost, and data updates can take a long time to filter through the system. This increases the risk of billing errors and delays – with a potentially negative impact on cash flow and your professional reputation.



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## 2) Custom Satellite Billing System

As an alternative to spreadsheets, some companies use a custom-built software platform, designed either by one of their own team, or by a third-party software developer. The benefit of this completely tailored solution is minimal implementation time and flawless integration with your legacy systems. However, the price of such bespoke systems can be high, and they can be difficult to update – making them vulnerable to obsolescence and restricting your ability to react promptly to market changes, e.g. major innovations introduced by a satellite operator.

In addition, your custom platform is supported only in so far as you maintain your relationship with the developer. If he or she leaves your employment, or goes out of business, you're left without support.

## 3) Specialist Satellite Airtime Billing Solutions

The most cost-effective and practical solution is a satellite billing platform specifically designed for the needs of satellite service providers like yourself. Our SATbill solution falls into this category. SATbill, as we'll see in the next section, is an adaptable billing solution designed to accommodate complex billing requirements – including multiple call tariffs, invoice cycles, CDR data formats, satellite operators and services.

Using SATbill eliminates the risk of billing errors and radically simplifies the invoicing process, cutting out dozens of hours of administration time when compared to a spreadsheet-based system. SATbill has all the advantages of a completely bespoke platform, with the added benefit of regular updates and in-warranty technical support. Compared to a bespoke system, the lifetime costs are far lower and long-term support more certain.

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## What To Look For In A Dedicated Airtime Billing Platform

So, if you are considering investing in a specialist airtime billing solution, what are the main features you should be looking for?

- ✔ Automated loading of CDR files from multiple sources, including FTP, emails and connected hard drives
- ✔ Support for both contracted (in arrears) and advance-pay tariffs
- ✔ The ability to create invoices at any level – e.g. by terminal, agreement, installation (e.g. vessel or aircraft) or by customer
- ✔ Support for invoicing from multiple billing entities with customisable invoice templates catering for different logos, tax codes and bank details
- ✔ Support for all call types and value-added services, including Global Xpress, Fleet Xpress, BGAN, FBB, SBB, Aero, SPS, GSPS, all forms of VSAT, Coastal Radio, Iridium and Iridium Certus, Thuraya, Globalstar, etc.
- ✔ Full tracking and monitoring for terminals/SIMs and installations
- ✔ Flexible billing cycles, including monthly, quarterly and annual subscriptions, plus irregular service charges, bespoke payment cycles, and part-period payments
- ✔ Integration of complex value and volume-based packages and allowances for grouping all service charges into one unified invoice
- ✔ Automatic calculation of credits and rebills if 'paid in advance' charges do not match what the customer then actually used
- ✔ Support for alternative pricing options and roaming calls
- ✔ Automated issuing of invoices and billing documents to customers by email
- ✔ Extensive reporting options, including cost of sales, margins, installations, branch offices, providers etc. – with reports exportable into Excel format
- ✔ Multiple currency support, and support for different tax/VAT regimes

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# SATbill: Our World-Class Satellite Airtime Billing Solution





## SATBILL: OUR WORLD-CLASS SATELLITE AIRTIME BILLING SOLUTION

SATbill is our comprehensive, dedicated airtime billing solution, designed to meet the needs of satellite service providers and distributors to streamline invoicing for complex services and call plans.

SATbill integrates different data streams, call plans and services into unified customer invoices, delivering greater accuracy and costing fewer resources. Extensive customisable margin controls and reporting options give you better visibility over your profitability and competitiveness. The platform can be configured to meet your specific needs, with complete modification available for existing services, and new services being added when required.

***SATbill is recognised as a world-class billing solution that is used by Service Providers of all the major satellite operators including Inmarsat, Iridium, Thuraya and Global Star to bill all call types and value-added services.***

In this section we will explore the benefits of SATbill for your business, and how you can find out more.



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## OUR WORLD-CLASS SATELLITE AIRTIME BILLING SOLUTION







### SATbill: The Software

SATbill is a modular platform, built using an SQL-compliant database.

SATbill can be used on a local installation or in the cloud and can be accessed by remote users via Citrix or another secure VPN, via any Internet-enabled PC or laptop.

### SATbill Modules

SATbill comes with the full suite of core features. Functionality can be increased with the addition of five optional modules:

-  **Hot Billing:** For daily billing and usage alerts
-  **Split Billing:** For separating a vessel's calls into distinct chargeable groups – e.g. different bills for owner, master, charterers, crewmembers, and so on
-  **Customer Portal:** A secure online portal through which customers can access billing documents, and view data use and charges
-  **Real-Time Monitoring:** for Iridium services
-  **Accounting Connectors:** This module integrates SATbill with a range of third-party accounting platforms, including SAP, Navision, Dynamics, Sage etc
-  **High-Usage Monitoring:** Enables any unit to be tracked and monitored and to set alerts when it reaches certain usage levels.

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### Advantages Of SATbill

- ✔ **Reduced Billing Time** – With faster invoicing comes better control of your cash flow, allowing you to request and receive customer payments with plenty of time before your payments to your satellite operators become due
- ✔ **More Accurate Billing** – SATbill automates the invoicing process, avoiding the billing errors and mistakes that are so common with spreadsheet-based systems. This leads to better customer relationships, reduced payment times and fewer refunds
- ✔ **Increased Margins And Profitability** – SATbill provides full visibility over your margins, allowing strategic decisions on pricing and service availability to maximise your margins while retaining competitiveness
- ✔ **Greater Responsiveness** – Modify existing services and quickly integrate new services into SATbill, allowing faster service launches and a shorter time to market
- ✔ **Increased Productivity** – SATbill simplifies the billing process, cutting the time needed to generate invoices and giving you greater flexibility over how to deploy your staff resources
- ✔ **Platform For Growth** – SATbill's power will enable your business to efficiently and accurately handle many more equipment items and CDRs, giving you the perfect platform to expand your business

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### Next Steps

Thank you for downloading this guide. If you'd like to know more about SATbill and the advantages it can bring to your business, the next step is to see the platform in action for yourself.

Please get in touch today to **request a free demo** of SATbill, incorporating live test data. The demo gives you the opportunity to ask questions and an appreciation of how it could add value to your business.

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