

You ask the questions...Audrey Marks, CEO of Paymaster Jamaica

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1. Why is the customer's account not updated the same day when the bill is paid at all locations?

The customers' accounts are updated to the client companies on the day of payment from all Paymaster locations. This is one of the features we are pleased to offer our customers. If you have made a payment that was not updated the same day, please contact us directly with the associated details by telephoning our toll-free number 1-888-PAY-BILL (729-2455).

2. Is your company authorised to deduct a percentage of the payments received from the customers of the utility companies before paying the collected sums over to them as a commission or fee for operating the collection process?

Paymaster Jamaica is not authorised to do so by our utility clients. We collect the fee as a separate and independent payment, and pay over the FULL amount of your settlement to the utility company.

3. Should a non-utility company have access to customers' utility files and personal details of telephone calls, utility consumption, etc.?

One of the most significant aspects of the Paymaster ethos is trust.

The utility companies, as well as our faithful customers trust us to maintain data. We are, therefore, duty bound, legally bound, contractually bound and ethically bound to honour that trust and we HAVE NEVER and WILL NEVER abuse that trust. Security is by far, our greatest cost, and a significant proportion of that goes into keeping consumer data safe and secure.

In essence, Paymaster Jamaica is bound by the same contract and rules of confidentiality and information disclosure that govern the utility companies, financial institutions, and other private and public sector agencies that have access to far more personal information than our company. If we are to be guided by our experience so far, we can say with confidence that Paymaster customers face no greater risk of privacy exposure than customers of banks, building societies, the government tax departments and so on.



Audrey Marks displays Paymaster's new Loyalty Card, which will allow customers to pay their bills without the new \$30 transaction fee. - file photos

4. Why do you think the public should now pay a service charge to pay their utility bills at Paymaster?

Paymaster Jamaica has, over the past nine years, invested tens of millions of dollars to create a physical and technological service infrastructure. This involves opening 150 outlets across every town in Jamaica, recruiting and training over 500 persons, creating and building a world- class IT transactions platform, etc., in order to make bills payment convenient and easy for Jamaicans paying up to 42 different commercial companies in one place at one time. This business model was, and continues to be anchored on the assumption that Jamaicans are busy and productive, and would therefore value and be willing to pay for the convenience, ease, and savings in time and travel cost that Paymaster has brought to the market. Ultimately, the market will decide whether we are correct in our assumption.

5. What is the ethical, moral and legal grounds under which the consumer is to pay a fee for paying their bills, when your company as the utility agent was set up by the utilities, for the convenience of the utility companies?

Paymaster Jamaica was NOT set up by the utilities; it is the result of a vision and consequent investment of a Jamaican entrepreneur. This investment was made completely independent of the utility companies, and was driven purely by considerations for the Jamaican public. However, by building locations for multiple bill payments, Paymaster has brought a level of efficiency to the process of bills collection that would be impossible for any single utility company to achieve. We would like to suggest that the higher cost incurred by the individual utility companies in providing this service, would ultimately be passed on to the consumers in one form or the other. Simply put, Paymaster Jamaica is just offering the service in a much more cost efficient way than the utilities are able to achieve.

The price of \$30 per transaction reflects the minimum required for cost recovery. Moreover, Paymaster has demonstrated extreme sensitivity to issues of affordability, by subsidising the cost to senior citizens and customers who make multiple monthly payments. Through the Paymaster Loyalty Card programme, the only cost to senior citizens is membership at \$130 per year, while regular customers with multiple monthly bills will pay a membership fee of \$650 per year. With your membership card, you pay no transaction fee, hence this is really a NO TRANSACTION FEE alternative, as the cost of the card will be recovered by the cash back loyalty points and discounts available to members.

6. It was reported that the fee adjustment was a result of the lack of increase from the utility companies. Did your contract with the companies, not include a clause for fee increase?

Yes, but we do not have a clause for automatic fee increase. We negotiate and have been in negotiations for the past four years under our current contracts.

The fact of the matter is that Paymaster Jamaica has subsidised its customers from inception, because, as provider of a novel and at the time unique service, we thought it was critical to first win the confidence of the market as a reliable and efficient payment agency. But as you know, as a private company, we could not continue this indefinitely. Moreover, the cost-base with which we began operation nine years ago is not the same today.

Please also bear in mind, that Paymaster, as a specialist bills collection agency, does not have other revenue streams and profit centres that can be used to cross-subsidise this service.

7. After calling Paymaster to find out about the different type of cards that will be available, and learning that up to five account numbers can be added to a card, I then ask how can I get a second card with those same account numbers? I was told you'll just have to pay another \$650 for a second card. Why?

The Paymaster Loyalty Card allows customers to pay one yearly membership fee for the benefit of being exempt from the \$30 per transaction charge. Based on our customer base, we have created three types/categories of cards:

1. Standard card \$650 for individual customers (up to 10 accounts)
2. Senior citizen's card \$130 for customers aged 65 & over
3. Corporate card \$1,300 for corporate customers/companies.

All costs are plus GCT.

We believe that the membership fee is reasonable given the benefits of using the card and considering what the card itself costs to produce. Believe me, there is little profit to be made on the card sales and we are more interested in promoting loyalty, so that we can continue to serve you. To activate the card, customers must list the account numbers of the various utility services for which they pay; these accounts will be associated with that individual card.

The matter of a free/discounted companion card which will presumably allow you the added convenience of someone else being able to pay your bills for you without having to incur the fee, is something that we will have to consider, bearing in mind the cost of the card itself.

However, you should note that your card can be used by someone else to pay the bills that are associated with your card and you will still receive the benefit of the transaction fee waiver.

8. I have six bills to pay per month, three utility bills for myself and three for my parents. You announced that there will be a senior citizen consideration, how can I benefit from this, or if that is not possible, can any special arrangement be looked into for persons like myself?

You really should open two accounts; one for yourself, and one for your parents.

The senior citizen consideration is applicable to persons who are 65 or older; the bills being paid must be in the name of the senior citizen. You may visit any Paymaster branch, collect or complete a Paymaster Loyalty Card application form, and submit it with a suitable identification (driver's licence, passport, national ID). Your parent would therefore pay for membership \$130 per year, for up to five bills per month at no transaction fee.

We realise that there will be a certain amount of 'creativity' applied to this rule but regular cross-checking by our systems will allow us to identify the 'creative customers'.

For yourself, you should enroll in the standard category at an annual membership of \$650. Therefore, a combined savings of \$1,380 per year will be realised between you and your parents as a result of enrolment in the Paymaster Loyalty Membership Club based on six bills per month.

The membership card will allow you to pay no transaction fee, even for additional bill payments such as cable, Internet service providers, and financial institutions. These additional bills plus multiple transactions to facilitate partial payments and late payments will increase your savings from not paying transaction fees to as much as \$4,600 per annum.

9. The problem that I have noticed in our nation is lack of trust. Why does this nation only care about material things?

I agree with your first observation - that there is, indeed, a general lack of trust in Jamaica. I also believe there is good reason for this; trust needs to be cultivated, and positively reinforced by our daily constructive actions. Trust cannot be created in, or exist in a vacuum. I am convinced that many of our leaders, particularly in the public and private sectors, have too often failed to live up to rules of proper governance, their promises and their commitments, and have not been held accountable for their transgressions. The result is the lack of moral authority among leaders to demand accountability right through the chain of command.

However, I respectfully disagree with your second assertion, for there are indeed significant pockets of individuals and organisations which have extended themselves for the uplifting of the less fortunate.

For example, I am involved in an organisation - Amcham - that has been at the forefront of engendering peace and healing of the nation initiatives. Amcham spearheaded community policing in the Grants Pen area of St. Andrew that has significantly reduced crime in that once volatile inner-city community. There are several other organisations, community groups, companies, individuals too numerous to name, that are providing millions of dollars, and their own time to help create a better society.

I must also make the point that there is nothing wrong with material things; we in fact need to widen the access of the majority of our citizens to the material things they need. The pursuit of same should not, however, be at the expense of our humanity and spiritual growth.

10. What are your views on companies, which pay janitors and messengers who work the hardest in any organisation, the lowest wages. Do you ensure that all organisations, of which you are a part, pay these categories of workers good salaries?

Personally, I value employees - not based on the title they hold in my organisation, but how well they do their jobs.

However, staff remuneration is a complex matter which reflects a combination of factors: the scarcity of the skill being employed, the profit being generated by the company, the productivity of the employee, the impact of the individual worker on the income of the company, and so on.

We always strive to pay salary that at the very minimum is comparable to industry standard, and which is reasonable to all stakeholders.

11. Why don't you use your husband's name?

Professionally, I use the name my customers and clients recognise. My husband agrees and supports this decision. In my personal life, I do use my husband's name.

12. Would you adopt children instead of having more?

This is definitely something to consider and the answer will be seen in due course. However, I do encourage adoption.

13. What do you do to relax?

For me, relaxation takes different forms, depending on how I feel.

Sometimes it is playing with my children, enjoying my family, spending time in worship and meditation, practising yoga, reading, playing golf or catching up with friends.