

Cogeco to refund \$440,000 after Internet service crashes

By IRENE GENTLE

The Champion

A \$440,000 payout is expected, but it's too soon to know the real cost of a recent Internet service crash at Cogeco Cable Inc.

The shut down left up to one half of the company's 45,000 customers in the Golden Horseshoe area without Internet use between 11 p.m. February 29 and up to 3 a.m. March 2.

As a result, each affected customer will receive a \$10 credit from Cogeco, adding up to something in the neighbourhood of \$440,000.

But it's too soon to know if the crash has turned customers off the vaunted high-speed cable hook-up service for good.

"That's a good question," said Cogeco's director of sales and marketing Ken Smithard. "I haven't seen the numbers yet, given that it just happened."

The downed server is the most dramatic of Cogeco's recent problems. But a surge of user growth has led to a slew of nagging tra-vails for the company over the last year.

"We went from 15,000 customers last January to about 45,000 now," Mr. Smithard said. "We've been growing very quickly and we've had some growing

"There was a hardware failure. The server actually crashed."
KEN SMITHARD

pains over the last few months."

Long waits at the technical support call centre, often inspired by weaknesses in the system itself, is one of the troubles.

But measures are being taken to shore that up, assured Mr. Smithard.

"There's a lot more being done in the actual planning and design," he said. "We're increasing the robustness of the system."

A stronger system should cut down the number of calls coming in to the support centre, where waits of an hour or more have been reported.

And a host of staff has been hired to beef up the centre, which runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

About 80 new employees have been hired to handle the call load. Also, cable customer service representatives have been trained to field tier one, or basic, Internet queries.

For improved accessibility, the cable call centre hours are now 24-

seven as well.

But the recent troubles haven't led to an abandon-ship mentality in customers so far, though growth has stalled slightly, said Mr. Smithard.

"The growth has slowed, is more of what we're seeing," he said. "But I think we'll see our growth rate pick right back up."

Last week's specific trouble stemmed from a crashed server.

"The traffic is carried to the regional data server," Mr. Smithard said. "There was a hardware failure. The server actually crashed."

Cogeco's Internet service is provided by Excite@Home, which is based in the United States. The service is contracted through cable companies.

Currently there are three servers in southern Ontario for Cogeco, and a fourth is being added to prevent another debilitating crash in the future, Mr. Smithard said.

Cable Internet has been wooing customers away from the traditional dial-up services by promising to be up to 100 times faster. Plus there's no waiting, and no busy signals.

"There's vast performance improvement over traditional dial-ups," Mr. Smithard said.

"People are looking for more than speed, they're looking for easy use. It provides the whole package."

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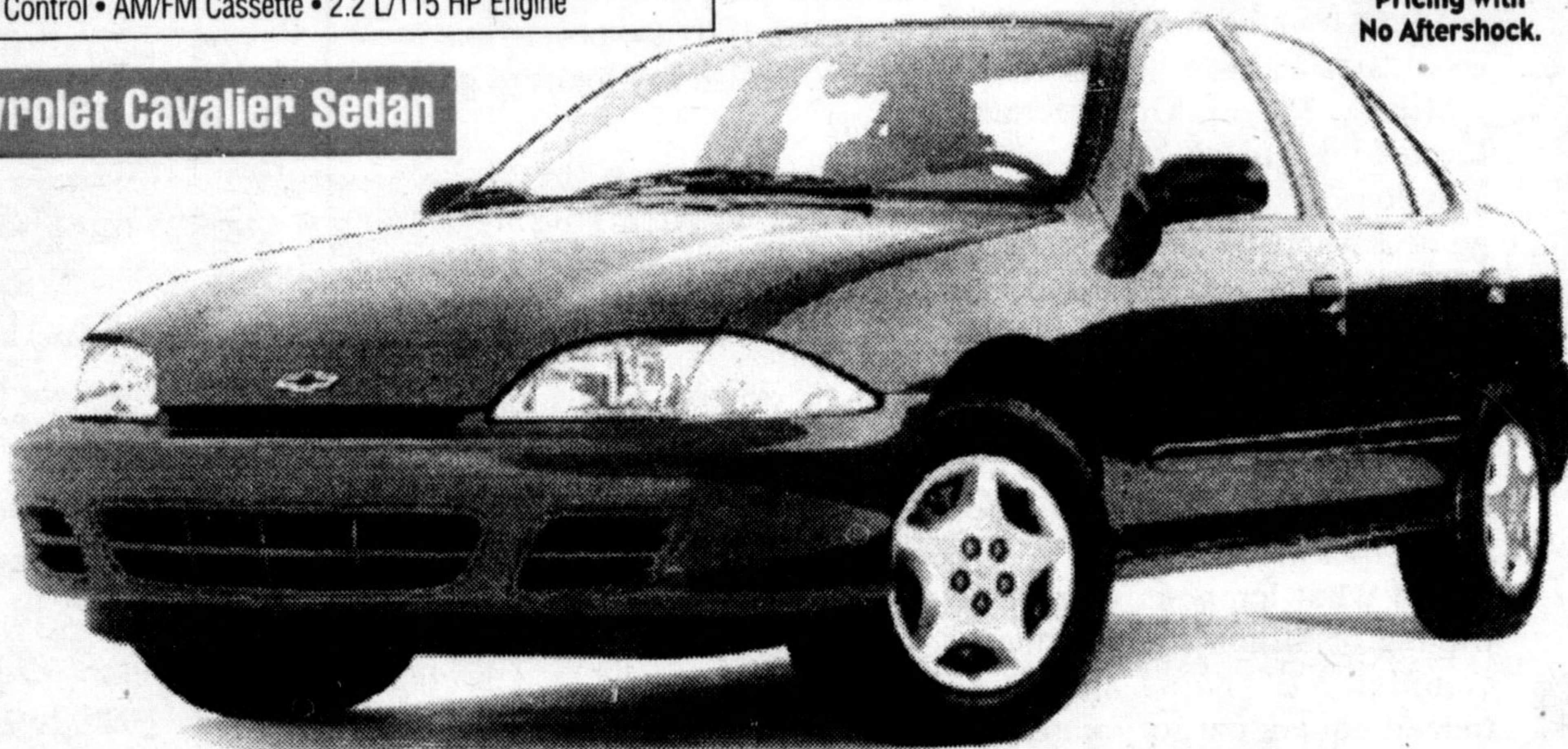
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