

Telcos rapped over knuckles

Katie Walsh

The stories are familiar: bounced from call centre to call centre from Bombay to Bangalore, seduced by an advertised broadband service that falls short on delivery, and shocked by an astronomical phone bill at the end of a seemingly mild month.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority yesterday made public submissions to its inquiry into telecommunications customer care. It has received more than 120 submissions from individuals, industry, government and consumer representative groups.

The review was prompted by the 130 per cent jump in complaints related to complaint handling made to the telecommunications industry ombudsman last year. Overall, 230,000 complaints were made, double the number received by the equivalent body in the UK, a country with three times Australia's population.

Only four submissions were received from phone companies. The authority's chairman, Chris Chapman, said he was surprised that they did not "come up with more constructive solutions to issues they admit are major problems" in their submissions.

Some customers wrote essay-length complaints laced with humour. "Baroque music is a calming accompaniment to my own fugue state," wrote Jonathan Borwein of Newcastle, who described in detail a

Left hanging

What consumers have told the telco inquiry

"After 53 minutes on the phone I had not been able to speak to anyone that could do anything. The young man answering the phone was courteous and apologetic but he could only either feed me back to the automated answering service (three times!) or to another section but he was cut off by them - eight times. Nothing else."

Alison Fraser Telstra customer

"I have my own job to perform so having to walk to the Telstra store every time I have a query and get some attention is just ridiculous. Unfortunately this is what I have had to resort to as it seems to be the only way I can get hold of someone to help me!"

Katherine Bykovec
Telstra customer

"I had to supply one operator after another with my details to confirm that this was in fact my account. They then informed me that through an unexplained error my account had been shut down and my phone number was given to someone else... It has been six days and I have heard nothing."

Konnie Penney Telstra customer

"There are no direct numbers to reach the person who you originally spoke to for your case, so you have to constantly go over old ground with a new operator."

Anton Ady
Optus customer



SOURCE: SUBMISSIONS TO ACMA

month-long effort to establish a Telstra broadband connection.

The Redfern Legal Centre cited a Greek pensioner in her 70s who was aggressively pursued for fees relating to her switch to another provider, ordered in confusion after a telemarketer's call.

A solicitor at the Redfern Legal Centre, Michelle Schonstein, said phone problems were a common reason people sought help at the centre.

She said many people misunderstood what they were signing up for.

"That one little mistake of signing up costs them thousands of dollars when they can't pay the bills or are slapped with an early termination fee," Ms Schonstein said.

Submissions from phone companies argued regulation wasn't needed to deliver good customer service. Telstra said a competitive market "provides a clear commercial incen-

tive for providers that influences the delivery of improved customer service and complaint handling".

SingTel Optus said "competition and serving customers is part of our organisational DNA".

The Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association said "poorly targeted 'consumer protection' regulation will stifle industry dynamism and competition".

A body representing telco consumers, the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network, said the industry had used the review "to get on the same old bandwagon about defending self-regulation".

The Communications and Media Authority will hold public hearings in October and November, which will be run on the internet. The draft report is expected in February 2011.

Meanwhile, survey results released by internet plan comparison company Compare Broadband show that customers might be willing to pay more to receive better customer service.

Asked "how much more would you pay for a broadband provider whose customer service is based in Australia?", two-thirds of the 334 respondents said they would pay between \$5 and \$20 more each month.

Compare Broadband general manager Scott Kennedy said that "broadband providers with support in Australia should be making more of a song and dance about it".