

ACCAN's Survey reveals telecommunications services are essential to small businesses but they are being let down by performance and customer service.

ACCAN surveyed 183 small and medium sized businesses between September – October to gain an understanding of SME's experiences with their telecommunications providers during the pandemic.

Issues of speed, reliability, poor customer service and high costs were predominant. Of all the issues, speed and reliability was mentioned the most, with 39% of SMEs who provided feedback citing poor service performance, slow internet speeds, dropouts, outages, congestion and unacceptable latency.

Performance issues are not only inconvenient for small businesses, but they come at a cost as businesses rely on the services to operate. We found that many businesses are having to rely on multiple services to ensure continuity of access.

“A very poor service has continued to deteriorate to the point that internet access is almost non-existent.”

“Not happy with [our] service when we have an NBN outage. [Its] very hard to run a business without internet and phone line.”

“NBN is poor performance and unreliable. We have had to install a fall over Sim device to maintain services when NBN fails.”

The survey also revealed that another major issue for small businesses was poor customer service. With 28% of respondents mentioning that they have experienced poor customer service and difficulties getting into contact with their provider. The survey showed that small businesses are spending large amounts of time trying to contact their provider and resolve issues.

“We are with Telstra. They often fail to get things dealt with on the first contact - in fact to correct issues they often take several shots at something before you find the person who gets it right. This costs the business time and money for people to continually follow up with them.”

“We had NBN connected about two months ago and have had nothing but trouble and is still not fixed... [I] have wasted a huge amount of time on the phone trying to sort it out and it is still not fixed. Being a business, we cannot function this way [it's] very disappointing.”

Lastly, 8% of comments mentioned prices being too high and services being unaffordable.

“I am aware of the generous provisions that NBN Co. have offered to NBN retail service providers during this COVID-19

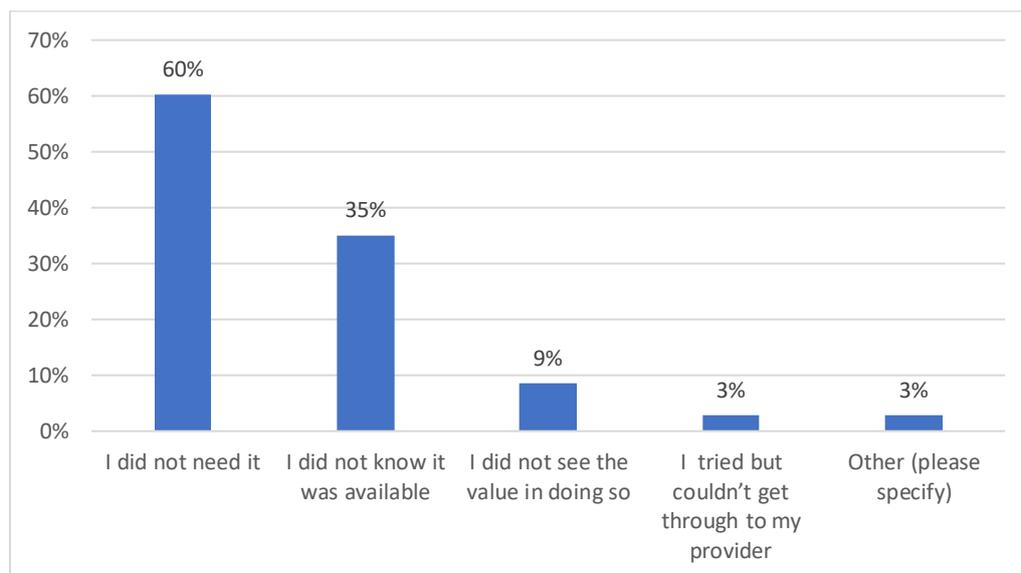
period. However, none of that largesse has been passed on to me by my service provider.”

Telcos need to be more proactive in offering financial hardship assistance to SMEs in need, as nearly 1 in 10 SMEs feel they will face difficulty paying their bills in the next six months.

The survey revealed that so far, only a small proportion of businesses had applied for financial hardship assistance from their telecommunication providers in the last 6 months. And it is encouraging that 60% of small businesses that did not request financial hardship assistance in the last 6 months felt that they did not need it. However, 35% of respondents that did not apply for financial hardship assistance were not aware that it is an option. As the economy recovers from recession and the pandemic, increased awareness of the options to small businesses is needed.

Concerningly there was a small number of respondents (3%) who had tried to access financial hardship assistance but couldn't get through to their provider.

Figure 1 Reasons why SME's had not requested financial hardship assistance in the last 6 months



Nearly 1 in 10 respondents felt that it was either likely or very likely that they will struggle to pay for their telecommunications bills in the next 6 months. For these businesses, accessing financial hardship assistance to manage bills could be vital to the survival of their business.

If you are struggling to pay your telecommunications bills, contact your provider to discuss your options.

Additional information on financial hardship assistance can be found at:

- ACCAN, *Talking Telco* :<http://accan.org.au/talking-telco/your-telco-rights/can-t-afford-my-bill>
- TIO, *COVID -19 Internet and Phone tips* <https://www.tio.com.au/help/customer-service/covid-19-phone-and-internet-tips#help-with-financial-difficulty>
- ACMA, *help if you can't pay your bill* <https://www.acma.gov.au/help-if-you-cant-pay-your-bill>