**ACCAN’s Disability Mystery Shopping report.**

September 2014

**Introduction**

ACCAN (Australian Communications Consumer Action network) has a strong membership base of disability organisations and individuals with disability. The most consistent feedback we get from our members relates to the lack of available information about telecommunications equipment and services for people with disability. Access to telecommunications for people with disability in Australia has long been recognised as a fundamental contributor to the disability digital divide.

There are a number of new and emerging telecommunication products which can improve access and participation for people with disability, however, without information about these products and how to access them, people with disability will continue to be left out of our increasingly connected digital community.

**Background**

ACCAN commissioned a mystery shopping project to test what information was provided by Telco customer service and sales staff in response to disability-related inquiries over the phone and in stores. We needed to verify the anecdotal reports we receive and develop an evidence base-line on availability and accessibility of information relevant to people with disability, to inform our discussions with industry and policy makers.

In total we made 200 inquiries comprising 100 visits to Telstra, Optus and Vodafone stores and 100 phone calls to Telstra, Optus, Vodafone, TPG and iiNet. The inquiries were made in March and April 2014.

**Methodology**

- The mystery shoppers presented with a variety of inquiries that are typical of the inquiries made by or on behalf of people with disabilities.

- For example, one inquiry we made was:

“My son is Deaf and is moving into his own apartment next month. Are there any phone services for Deaf people? We’ve always made calls for him and taken messages but now he will be on his own so we are investigating what is available.”

- We undertook a mix of inquiries like this for deaf and hearing impaired scenarios, as well as blind and vision impaired scenarios and also dexterity impaired scenarios. We inquired about both landlines and mobiles for each of these groups.

For each type of inquiry we developed a complete list of products and services that we know are available according to each Telco’s official policies, or should be available according to law.

All of these would ideally have been mentioned by staff for each of the inquiry types. The list for different telcos differed according to the different services available.

A score from 0 to 3 was given according to how many of the products or services were mentioned by staff, with a 0 score being given when staff mentioned none, and 3 when staff mentioned all or almost all.

**Results**

Disappointingly, the results we received were not good. No one company performed significantly better or worse than any other. Overall the results for each of the companies surveyed supported the anecdotal reports we receive on access to relevant telecommunications products and services for consumers with disability – it is very difficult to get information from telco sales staff.

Unfortunately on the majority of occasions, unless the person inquiring already knows what is available and specifically asks for it, they are likely to remain uninformed or only partially informed.

While the individual shopper reports indicate that most staff are professional, friendly and polite, on the whole this study would indicate they are inadequately informed about what is on offer for people with disabilities.

**Telco response**

ACCAN contacted each of the telcos surveyed and shared the research results with them. We have had follow up discussions with Telstra, Optus and Vodafone to review the research and discuss what needs to change, what improvements should be expected and what initiatives each of the telcos plan to implement in response to the information provided by this research. These ongoing discussions have been very constructive. Each of the telcos have acknowledged that the research has highlighted disappointing gaps in the awareness and knowledge of their customer service agents, and as such, each telco has begun implementing a number of measures to improve both call-centre and shop-front agent’s disability awareness.

ACCAN has committed to ongoing discussions with the telcos to encourage improvement, provide useful consumer feedback and importantly to help publicise telco information and resources relevant and useful for telecommunications consumers with disability. We will update our Disability Portal https://accan.org.au/consumer-info/disability with information resources from each of the telcos, providing an up-to-date one-stop shop for telecommunications consumers with disability.

ACCAN has been encouraged by the positive response from Telstra, Optus and Vodafone and we look forward to seeing improvement in the availability and accessibility of telecommunications products and services information for consumers with disability.