Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

Small Business Advisory Forum
Meeting Report

Wednesday, 13 May 2020

2.00 – 4.00pm by Videoconference

PRESENT:	**Victoria Rubensohn**	**Chairperson (ACCAN Board Director)**
	Mark Mc Kenzie	2508+ Disconnected &
		Council of Small Business Australia
	Renee Austin	NSW Farmers
	Rebekah Godbold	Dept Employment, Small Bus. & Training QLD
	Sally Rodgers	Digital Gold
	Paul Brooks	Internet Australia
	Simon Moore	Business NSW
	Adrienne Ryan	National Farmers Federation
ACCAN:	Teresa Corbin	CEO
	Andrew Williams	Director Operations
	Una Lawrence	Director of Policy
	Kelly Lindsay	Consumer Engagement & Membership Officer
	Megan Ward	Economic Adviser
APOLOGIES:	Daniel Shepherdson	Victorian Small Business Commission
	John Chapman	South Australia Small Business Commissioner

The purpose of the Small Business Advisory Forum (SBAF) is to discuss the most important telecommunications consumer issues from the perspective of key representative in the small business environment and the people they represent, with a view to incorporating these into ACCAN's work priorities for the 2020-21 year. The following meeting report provides an overview of the main issues raised and discussed.

ACCAN distributed several documents prior to the meeting to provide background for the discussions: ACCAN Policy Priorities 2019-20; Environment Scan 2020 - Communications Consumer Issues; Small Business complaints data from the TIO Annual Report; A Summary of the Telco COVID-19 responses; A Brief about Regional Media changes.

1. Current Communications Issues and Small Business

Service Reliability
Current rules for reliability do not meet the needs of small businesses as they are outdated. Regulatory safeguards for installation/connection and fault repairs are aimed at telephony and need to be retargeted towards internet services.

NBN offers business grade services with enhanced response times but:

- these are charged at a higher rate and can be expensive. Cost is a deterrent, so small businesses will often opt for cheaper services that down the track may not perform as needed
- they are not offered by all telco retailers as a targeted small business service
- small businesses aren't always aware of what services they can get and from which telco (targeted information education is needed) or how it might affect their business if they do not have a business grade product

Service Design
Services are not designed sufficiently well to meet the needs of small businesses.

- Small businesses are buying asymmetric services (eg: 50/10 Mbps) designed for residential use, when upstream bandwidth is important for their needs. There is a need to advocate for symmetric services (eg: 50/50Mbps)
- NBN's response is that the problem is with the product selection by retailers, as wholesale symmetrical services are available, but retailers predominantly sell asymmetric products (the most profitable services) but they are inappropriate for business. 2. COVID Response

There was positive agreement that telecommunications services have performed well. Business NSW has conducted a member call around and no new issues around performance were identified, and speeds have improved. Feedback on working remotely has been good, and the hope is that this level of performance is maintained.

However, the following issues were noted:

- For the first few weeks of lockdown calls were dropping out due to increased demand (eg: call volumes related to Job Keeper)
- NBN Package:

- Attention is needed to how small businesses can get the information needed to access relief measures. There is no information available about who is eligible and how they apply.
- Impact of NBN relief package on ground has been minimal, due to lack of information and ignorance of what assistance is available.

3. Post-COVID Shut down Response

ACMA Regulatory Forbearance
ACCAN staff briefed the meeting about the approach by RSPs for regulatory forbearance from both the ACMA and ACCC.

The view of the participants was that now is a pivotal time for businesses to move online, and it is more critically important than ever that telecommunications service standards are maintained or improved during this transition as there is greater dependence on telecommunications services.

There was concern about how regulatory forbearance might affect small business customers of RSPs.

Support required post shutdown for small business sector
The economic recovery will be slow, it is estimated that 25% of SMEs will close by the end of 2020, and the following initiatives will be needed from the telecommunications sector to support recovery:

- Extension of existing telco support measures, because many small businesses are not currently operating and will struggle to get back on their feet after the lockdown and need ongoing support.
- Many small businesses are setting up online delivery channels, but they need assistance to resource up so they have the skills needed to do so and/or have access to technicians who can assist.
- The productivity benefits of working during the lockdown should not be lost – remote working can be more efficient and benefits both employer and employee. This can be a strategic opportunity for telework that has been demonstrated through the crisis, but communications infrastructure needs to adjust to meet this demand on an ongoing basis.
- The implications of closures of physical stores need to be carefully considered.

4. Impact of Natural Disasters: Bushfire/Floods

The Federal Government's newly released bushfire assistance package was noted and welcomed.

Critical issues for small businesses identified were:

- Preventing network failure so there is business continuity and maintenance of services like EFTPOS.
  - Unsuitability of satellite-based emergency services for EFTPOS were noted due to speed and latency issues, as well as capacity.
- Power network failure, and critical timing of when the power network will be turned off. There is a need to improve the robustness of electricity networks. Telecommunications networks are critically dependent on power networks.
  - One option would be to build networks underground in high risk areas to increase reliability during floods and bushfires.
- Telecommunications are not identified as essential services, and subsequently are not eligible for prioritised access to fuel needed to power base station generators in emergencies. Essential services legislation needs to be amended to change this, as telecommunications services are clearly essential in natural disaster emergencies.
- Due to the impact of floods in Queensland last year, small business turnover was negatively affected when businesses had to close. Consequently, these businesses have not met the turnover requirements for JobKeeper eligibility and are doubly disadvantaged. The longer term repercussions of natural disasters must be taken into account in relief measures – there are immediate and longer term consequences.

5. Regional Media Closures and Small Business Implications

This was not considered to be a high priority issue for small business currently, but the following points were noted:

- Small business capacity to advertised is now more served by social media platforms rather than traditional media, and it costs less. However, prices could rise due to lack of competition and this could harm small businesses as they have limited leverage.
- There will be some impact for Business NSW members, but the issue will be to make new ways of advertising work well rather than reviving old formats.

6. Research

Ideas for research topics that would be useful and timely for the small business sector were canvassed, and included:

- What's the future for small businesses that have pivoted online during the COVID-19 lockdown? How has consumer behavior changed? What is the future for consumers, are they expecting online shopping from now on?
- An examination of the productivity benefits derived from telehealth and remote working – time savings, transport savings, maintaining skilled worker engagement.

- An examination of two effects of the COVID-19 lockdown for small businesses: how they've changed their product mix to online, and how they've adapted at the back end and changed their operations.
- What are the implications of increased remote working on small business commercial tenancies?

7. Future ACCAN Policy Focus

The feedback and suggestions made at the Small Business Advisory Forum will be used to inform ACCAN's future policy priorities, policy focus, operations plan and research activity plan.

In summary the meeting outcomes included:

- ACCAN telecommunications reliability policy for small businesses needs reframing in the current context
- ACCAN to co-ordinate a joint letter to the Minister for Communications identifying the communications needs of small business emerging from the COVID-19 lockdown
- ACCAN to collate information on small business COVID-19 relief packages and share with attendees to promote through their networks
- ACCAN to assess budgetary capacity to incorporate elements of research ideas discussed in 2020-21 research plan
- ACCAN to take on board issues and approaches identified in policy priorities for 2020-21

Wrap up and close of meeting

Attendees agreed that it would be useful to meet again later in the year, possibly in September. It was felt that the videoconferencing format was more inclusive, allowed for more participation and should be continued for the next meeting.

ACCAN CEO, Teresa Corbin, thanked the SBAF participants and Victoria Rubensohn, the chairperson, for their time and valuable contributions.

The chairperson closed the meeting at 4.00pm.