



Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

Small Business Advisory Forum

Meeting Report

Thursday, 21 April 2022, 2:00PM – 4:00PM
by videoconference

PRESENT:

Dominic Schipano	Australian Digital and Telecommunication industry ADTIA & COSBOA
Atia Sadiqzai	Australian Small Business Family Enterprise Ombudsman's Office
Simon Moore	Business NSW
Gavin Freeman	Business Olympian Group
Will Harris	Council of Small Business Organisations Australia - COSBOA
Sally Rodgers	Digital Gold
Chris Young	National Farmers Federation
Laurence Redaelli	Office of NSW Small Business Commissioners Office
Robert Mallett	Small Business Council of Tasmania

ACCAN:

Keith Besgrove	ACCAN Board (Chair)
Andrew Williams	Chief Executive Officer
Meredith Lea	Policy Manager
Megan Ward	Economic Adviser
Tanya Karliychuk	Grants and Research Manager
Melyssa Troy	Media and Communications Manager
Caidee Heriot	Communications Assistant
Kelly Lindsay	Consumer Engagement and Membership Officer

APOLOGIES:

Mark McKenzie	2508 + Disconnected
Cameron Dyson-Smith	Australian Small Business Family Enterprise Ombudsman's Office

Mike Kearney	Australian Small Business Family Enterprise Ombudsman's Office
Jan Walker	Australian Small Business Family Enterprise Ombudsman's Office
Graham Catt	Canberra Business Chamber
Rebekah Godbold	Department of Employment, Small Business and Training - Queensland
Kathy Rankin	NSW Farmers
Renee Austin	NSW Farmers
Helen Nezeritis	Office of NSW Small Business Commissioners Office
Stephanie Croft	Office of NSW Small Business Commissioners Office
Anthony Trainor	Small Business Australia
Nerissa Kilvert	South Australia Small Business Commissioner
Carolyn Jeffrey	Women in Business Regional Network

The purpose of ACCAN's Small Business Advisory Forum (SBAF) is to identify the most important telecommunications consumer issues from the perspective of key representatives in the small business environment and the people they represent, with a view to incorporating these into ACCAN's future policy priorities for the 2022-23 year.

The following meeting report provides an overview of the main issues raised and discussed. SBAF participants are welcome to use this document in reporting back to their organisations. This report will also be sent to invited representatives who were unable to attend.

ACCAN distributed the following documents prior to the meeting to provide background for the discussions:

- ACCAN Environment Scan
- Policy Priorities for 2021-22
- Information about ACCAN's auDA Foundation Grant project

1. Overview of current communications context

ACCAN CEO Andrew Williams outlined the current external communications context within which ACCAN is working. This was set out in the ACCAN Environment Scan, circulated to participants before the Forum. This context setting included discussion regarding:

- The upcoming Federal Election, and anticipated impacts that may have on ACCAN's work and workload in the coming months. ACCAN has recently published information about the major parties' communications-related election policies on its website.
- The Regional Telecommunications Review, Mobile Black Spots and small business-related impacts (such as EFTPOS dropouts).
- Digital Platform related issues, including cyber security.
- The ACCC's work on NBN Co's Special Access Undertaking (SAU) Variation.

SBAF participants provided feedback on the impact that natural disasters can have on small businesses, including in relation to the risk of scams post-disaster. Information was also provided about the current focus on encouraging small businesses to get online and digitally upskill, yet participants reported there are limitations in how cyber security is dealt with as part of these

conversations. Participants expressed concern that cyber security measures are still an afterthought or not considered by businesses until something goes wrong, and also shared their concern that the focus on getting businesses online would expose more businesses to cyber security issues. The importance of concise information (e.g., a couple of bullet points) that provides the essentials required to support businesses to be cyber secure, was also discussed.

SBAF participants spoke to the difficulty that some small businesses can experience in getting connected, particularly in regional areas. One small business reported that the only option available to them was ADSL – other options (e.g., 4G modems, Sky Muster) did not meet their needs in terms of speed and data. Participants commented that although COVID-19 has accelerated some digital transformation, small businesses still need to educate themselves about the connectivity options available, and outlay funds to set up those solutions. This also extends to domain names, firewalls and other cyber security related expenses.

2. Discussion about 2021-22 policy priorities and future activities

ACCAN reported on previous action against existing policy priorities and welcomed feedback from SBAF participants on whether these priorities continue to reflect the phone and internet issues experienced by small businesses.

Affordable telecommunications for all

Areas ACCAN has focused on in relation to affordability in the 2021 calendar year included NBN pricing, the NBN Special Access Undertaking (SAU) Variation, and an analysis of mobile affordability. ACCAN explained its intention to, amongst other things, continue work in 2022 in relation to the NBN SAU, advocacy regarding a concessional NBN offering for people on low incomes, and work in relation to mobile and device affordability.

SBAF participants provided the following feedback:

- Small businesses in regional and rural areas often incur additional fees for their telecommunications services; for instance, thousands of dollars for an antenna or equipment to extend signals.
- Some small businesses experience difficulties getting the right connection type for their building, which can be time consuming and costly (e.g., running cables through walls). Other businesses are unable to get Sky Muster or satellite services because there are several other units on the premises. This restricts consumer choice and has implications on affordability.
- The quality of communications connections can also affect the affordability of services for small businesses. This might relate to where the small business is located – for instance, they might operate out of an older shopping centre which has poor connectivity or limited mobile coverage; however the small business can't afford to independently improve the connectivity. In some cases, shopping centre owners or body corporates can influence who small businesses connect to, which can dictate price.

A fairer telco market

Areas ACCAN has focused on in relation to fairness in the 2021 calendar year included the development of a retail registration scheme policy position, work in relation to consumers experiencing vulnerability, numbering issues, and analysis and monitoring of telco complaints. ACCAN explained its intention to continue its work in relation to all of these areas in 2022 and

identified a few areas where further policy work is planned, including regarding telco payment issues, mis-selling and the need for an independent plan comparison tool.

SBAF participants provided the following feedback:

- Any retail registration scheme would need to clearly assign an entity to be responsible for the process, such as the ACMA or ACCC.
- SBAF participants felt that some small businesses have given up making complaints to their telecommunications provider and the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO). Instead, they might seek advice or assistance from their local member, council, or industry association.
- Some small businesses are seeking services from IT providers instead of directly through telecommunications providers. This is because they find the IT provider can resolve telecommunications related issues quite quickly. It also allows small businesses to have a one-stop-shop for their phone, internet and online activities, meaning they can contact one person to fix a range of issues, rather than spending time trying to resolve issues directly with a telecommunications provider.
- Small business awareness of the TIO might have decreased in the last few years, and SBAF participants reiterated that third parties are instead the preference (e.g., asking the industry association for advice) given third parties often better understand the needs of small businesses and the urgency for solutions to prevent customer or revenue loss during telecommunications outages or issues.

Better infrastructure

Areas ACCAN has focused on in relation to infrastructure in the 2021 calendar year included work on a Future of Broadband policy position, and participation in the Alternative Voice Services Trial Stakeholder Reference Group. ACCAN explained its intention to continue this work in 2022, including by publishing a policy position on the Future of Broadband, monitoring NBN upgrades, continuing to work with ACCAN's Indigenous Steering Committee, and continuing to advocate alongside the Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC) to improve communications for the bush.

SBAF participants provided the following feedback:

- Some telecommunications cablers find that the previous cabler has done a poor job, which affects the reliability of the connection and infrastructure and in some cases makes them reluctant to do subsequent work on the infrastructure. This can be particularly bad in shopping centres where there may be three or four different cabling companies dealing with the centre or body corporate. Professional Development or training is needed for cablers to ensure work is done safely and efficiently.
- Some cyber security concerns were raised in relation to public Wi-Fi systems, and the need for consumer education about being safe and secure when using public Wi-Fi.

Increased reliability

Areas ACCAN has focused on in relation to reliability in the 2021 calendar year included working with the RRRCC, and submitting to consultations regarding standards, rules and benchmarks for Statutory Infrastructure Providers. ACCAN explained its intention to continue this work in 2022,

particularly in relation to improvements to wholesale broadband service standards, and through the drafting of a policy position regarding the essentiality of communications services.

SBAF participants provided the following feedback:

- The resilience of the network in natural disasters is a contemporary issue affecting small businesses. Solutions to this should aim to improve the quality of service in addition to improving resiliency.
- During and after natural disasters, community hubs (at post offices, community halls, evacuation centres etc.) should make public Wi-Fi available.
- Small businesses find it takes a long time for infrastructure to be rebuilt after natural disasters. Small businesses are unable to sell online if they don't have an internet connection available to them, so it's a combination of infrastructure, device and connectivity issues that need to be addressed. There is a need to harden infrastructure to improve the reliability and resiliency of communications services.

Growing consumer confidence

Areas ACCAN has focused on in relation to consumer confidence in the 2021 calendar year included the Consumer Data Right (CDR), privacy issues, and online safety and content. ACCAN explained its intention to continue this work into 2022, in addition to work on digital inclusion, scams, and cyber security.

SBAF participants provided the following feedback:

- There have been some positive developments, for instance a local community neighbourhood house securing a grant to fund travel to small townships to teach different digital inclusion skills, particularly to older people.
- Other positive developments include small businesses getting online for the first time to sell their wares, which was critical given natural disasters and COVID-19 impacting physical sales. Businesses are embracing being online and the opportunities of digital technologies.
- Some small businesses are facing difficulties keeping up with digital jargon and understanding how the technology works, particularly in complex systems.
- There is a need to reduce the time small businesses spend engaging with issues of cyber security and network resiliency. These issues must be as easy as possible for small businesses to engage with. This could involve information about cyber security insurance and other issues on the fringes of the communications sector.

3. ACCAN SMB domain name security project discussion

ACCAN Media and Communications Manager Melyssa Troy provided an overview of the auDA Foundation grant project that ACCAN is currently working on. The aim of the project is to educate small businesses on domain name security.

In response to questions about what small businesses know about domain names; where they would typically get cyber security information from; and what type or format of information would be most useful for small businesses, SBAF participants provided the following feedback:

- Small businesses may only think about domain names once, when they're setting up their online presence and trying to get the domain name as close to their business name as possible.
- Lawyers, accountants and other entities helping small businesses to get started might be able to provide information about domain names and cyber security. Industry associations also play a role in sharing information to small businesses, and information received from these bodies may be viewed as more trustworthy than information coming from other sources.
- Some SBAF participants felt that one-page documents with a few clear bullet points are most useful for small businesses, while others felt that short and straightforward videos with links on social media can also be effective. The consensus was that multiple avenues are necessary to deliver this information to small businesses.

4. Sum up and meeting close

The feedback and suggestions made at the Small Business Advisory Forum will be used to inform ACCAN's future policy priorities and research activity plan. These will be circulated to members of the Forum when finalised.

ACCAN Board Member and Forum Chair, Keith Besgrove, and ACCAN CEO Andrew Williams thanked the SBAF participants for their time and valuable contributions.