



Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

Small Business Advisory Forum

Meeting Report

Wednesday, 13 March 2024, 2:00pm – 3:30pm
by videoconference

PRESENT:

Andrew Stewart	Hearing Connections
Laurence Redaelli	NSW Small Business Commissioners Office
Alexi Boyd	Small Biz Matters
Bruce Bebbington	ACCAN Individual Member
Sonia Sadrani	Council of Small Business Organisations Australia
Mustafa Agha	Business NSW

ACCAN:

Keith Besgrove	ACCAN Board and SBAF Chair
Gareth Downing	Acting Chief Executive Officer
Kelly Lindsay	Stakeholder Engagement Manager
Audrey Reoch	Senior Economic Adviser
Sam Kininmonth	Policy Adviser

APOLOGIES:

Michael Lewis	auDA
Robert Mallet	Alchin Consulting
Luke Achterstraat	Council of Small Business Organisations Australia

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. This then informs the development of ACCAN's future policy priorities for the 2024-25 year.

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.

1. Background

ACCAN's consumer consultation is ongoing and multi-format. We hold our formal advisory forums annually and aim to meet regularly with our member organisations. We regularly review the advisory forum format and content to support effective engagement.

Our aim is to provide an opportunity for genuine two-way communication that best allows us to hear from our members and other stakeholders about their communities' communications issues. This allows us to ensure that our work priorities and policies address issues of concern and meet our members' needs.

The objective of this forum was to inform the development of our 2024-25 policy priorities and our policy themes, as well as update stakeholders with interest in small businesses about upcoming telecommunications issues of importance for their sector.

2. NBN's New Economic Regulation

ACCAN Senior Economic Adviser Audrey Reoch presented an overview of the National Broadband Network (NBN) Special Access Undertaking (SAU). The SAU is the ACCC regulation which determines the prices and conditions of the broadband services that NBN provides to Retail Service Providers (RSPs). The new SAU established a requirement for engagement with a Consumer Advocacy Group, and opened the possibility of greater consumer engagement on pricing and service standards.

In response to questions from the group, ACCAN Acting CEO Gareth Downing elaborated that this process will hopefully mirror what occurs in the energy sector, where consumer engagement is built into the service provider's expenditure proposals. There will continue to be a lot of work here, and ACCAN has been advocating for a fully funded consumer engagement role in this process.

3. Department Consultation on the Universal Services Obligation

Acting CEO Gareth Downing presents ACCAN's response to the Universal Services Obligation (USO). The proposed review will have the biggest effect on regional consumers and businesses, who may still use landline services, as the current USO contract with Telstra only supplies landline phones and public payphones. In ACCAN's view this is a timely opportunity to modernize and strengthen existing USO arrangements, given there are several overlapping policies, and with the possibility of expanding what universal services mean and can deliver. Being able to deliver a modern USO which has review processes in-built will be able to deliver much better results for consumers and small businesses.

Members of the group noted personal anecdotes about the difficulties of getting Telstra to fix issues with universal services. In some situations, they faced services that were so deteriorated that they could only use them when closer to a metropolitan area. This affected their ability to operate a business, as well as to have access to emergency services. They consider some ability to compel the USO operator to make required repairs to be a necessity.

ACCAN has proposed a dynamic institutional model that allows for capability uplift, rather than specific technologies or indefinite timeframes. If the USO is capable of improving universal services

as technology improves it can better support consumers and small businesses in regional, rural and remote areas.

There was support for the need for data as a basic right on the same level as energy, given its economic functions, particularly in facilitating payments. Many people after natural disasters are more concerned with restoring their business before their household, as the former maintains their livelihood. A loss of even one day's trading makes a huge impact on a business.

4. 2024-25 Small Business Communications Issues

ACCAN acknowledges the good news that the overall trend of small business complaints to the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) are down. ACCAN would like to touch base with small business advocates to see whether these statistics align with their experiences of improving outcomes for small businesses.

Some members of the cohort believe it's a case of the former not the latter, as some businesses are more likely to just go straight to the TIO as they're guaranteed an actual result rather than through dealing with the Retail Service Provider (RSP) directly. There are questions about whether it's possible for RSPs to provide some kind of redundancy measure to ensure payments still take place. Some members of the cohort living even in major cities are dealing with blackouts and power outages, which affects their access to telecommunications services.

Telco services are hugely reliant upon main power sources, so when they go down the telco network goes down with them. This is an area which ACCAN is engaging on further research about, as this is an area which requires further study given how reliant society is on telecommunications being fully operational. ACCAN can look further into the impacts of digitisation on small businesses and how they can be better mitigated at a design level.

Additional areas of ACCAN work were raised, including mobile blackspots funding, advocacy for dispute resolution on digital platforms, action on scams including a mandatory SMS sender ID registry. Regarding SMS registry. ACCAN has engaged with Council of Small Businesses of Australia (COSBOA) to ensure that any regulations that came in would have minimal impacts on small businesses.

Members of the cohort also raised the issues in dealing with digital platforms, who as big corporations can sometimes be less accountable and more difficult to deal with for small businesses than regular consumers. ACCAN acknowledges this feedback and will incorporate it, having advocated for a digital platforms ombudsman for some time now.

5. 3G Shutdown

ACCAN Stakeholder Engagement Manager Kelly Lindsay led a discussion of the impending 3G shutdown and the related issues to it. TPG has already shut down their 3G network in December, with Telstra scheduled for 30 June 2024 and Optus in September 2024. This may have significant implications on a range of communications services, including EFTPOS terminals, agricultural equipment, and general access to communications for older or less connected Australians.

The Australian Mobile Telecommunications Industry (**AMTA**) has worked closely with device manufacturers to ensure that communications go out for users of equipment which requires network access. Communications will likely ramp up over the next few months as it becomes more of a reality to consumers.

Members of the cohort raised the issue of EFTPOS machines in particular. There is some evidence that the banks have some work to do in terms of replacing some of these machines, especially in regional towns where there may be hundreds of these devices. However, ACCAN expects that some of these communications will continue to build up as the date of shutdown draws closer.

The cohort also agreed that generating some 'white label' communications materials would also help institutions get the message out in their networks. There is still some difficulty in getting the right information – i.e. some 4G phones may be affected by the 3G shutdown. Telcos have begun to produce less technical information flyers and distribute at consumer events.

6. Conclusion

ACCAN Board Member and Chair of the Small Business Advisory Forums Keith Besgrove wrapped up the meeting, noting that there were useful suggestions for how to manage the 3G shutdown and a range of issues that small businesses have mentioned with regard to digital platforms and access to universal services, particularly data. These reflect some of ACCAN's existing priorities, but will be incorporated to better inform our approach going forward.