



Small Business Advisory Forum (SBAF) Meeting Report

Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

Tuesday, 9 June 2015 11.00am – 3.00pm

PRESENT: Len Bytheway (Chairperson)
Peter Strong, Council of Small Businesses of Australia
Shara Evans, Market Clarity
Alyssa Stempniak, Office of the NSW Small Business Commissioner
Ewan Brown, Gunghalin Community Council
Michelle Jacobs, NSW Farmers Association
Debbie Littlehales, Kiama Community College

APOLOGIES: Narelle Clark, ACCAN

ACCAN STAFF: Teresa Corbin, CEO
Una Lawrence, Director of Policy
Kelly Lindsay, Project Officer – Small Business
Alan Howard, DBK Project Officer (12:20-12:35pm)
Katerina Pavlidis, Grants and Research Officer (12:20-12:35pm)

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 2015-16 year.

The following meeting report provides an overview of the main issues raised and discussed. SBAF participants are encouraged to use this document in reporting back to their organisations.

ACCAN future small business focus 2015/16

Environmental scan

A Small Business Environmental Scan was circulated prior to the meeting, with the aim of capturing the issues that ACCAN is currently working on, and to identify priorities of our stakeholders so that we can map the year ahead. It was the baseline document for discussion at the meeting. Attendees at the Forum had also been asked to come prepared with feedback concerning short and long term priorities for their organisations for further discussion.

Consumer Issues

ACCAN staff provided a brief outline of several major consumer issues.

Customer Service Guarantee (CSG)

The CSG is an obligation on standard telephone services, which mandates a number of requirements that providers must adhere to, such as appointment keeping times, and connection and fault repair timeframes. Telstra has proposed changes to reduce these obligations and ACCAN has provided feedback on the proposals. We are yet to hear a response from Telstra. The CSG currently has flaws - for example, as the Universal Service Provider, Telstra is unable to waive the CSG, but other standard telephone service providers may do so. Most other providers comply with the CSG. TPG is the only major provider to waive it. ACCAN members have told us that the CSG as it currently exists is important to them both as residential and small business customers.

Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO)

Complaints to the TIO have decreased 40 per cent, however ACCAN is concerned that consumers may be experiencing 'complaint fatigue' and the decrease in complaints is not necessarily a result of improved customer service or products.

Rural and Regional mobile 'black spots'

The Government will announce funded mobile towers under the Mobile Black Spot Programme before the end of this financial year. The funding available falls considerably short of the cost to meet the demand for new towers and coverage. The government might announce further funding to coincide with the announcement of the outcome of tender process. ACCAN will be encouraging the government to provide longer term funding of the program.

Universal Service Obligation (USO)

Telstra has a USO agreement until 2032, to ensure standard telephone services (STS) and payphones are reasonably accessible to all people in Australia on an equitable basis, wherever they work or live. It applies to fixed line telephones only at this stage.

NBN issues

ACCAN's position on the NBN is that no consumer should be worse off before, during or after the rollout and we continue to advocate for safeguards and protections to facilitate this. The rollout of the NBN has been complicated by the change of policy and the multi-technology model that has now been introduced. The TIO has seen a decrease in the levels of NBN-related complaints proportionate to the number of people now active on the network. The Fibre to the Node (FTTN) and hybrid fibre-coaxial (HFC) models will begin to be rolled out in 2016. The long term satellite service will be

commercially active in 2016. ACCAN is examining how mobility issues (for example consumers who might move houses more often than most - tenants, social housing residents, Indigenous consumers) might impact on the NBN delivery.

Cybersafety

ACCAN is aware of the high incidence of attacks on small businesses by scammers and opportunists and the threat this places on small business. ACCAN continues to be proactive, by;

- Providing support and referral
- Producing educational materials
- Advocating for law reform
- Working with relevant bodies, e.g. ScamWatch

Digital Literacy Training

Digital Business Kit – Digital Ready (digitalready.org.au/)

ACCAN has developed an online digital literacy kit called Digital Ready. This project is funded for four years by the Department of Communications and is aimed at small businesses and not for profit organisations in the arts, recreation and education sector, but can be used by anyone. It contains six training modules and is provided free to the public.

ACCAN Grants Scheme

ACCAN continues to manage a Grants Scheme that offers the opportunity of funding to eligible, telecommunications based research. Eligibility criteria and research project reports are available on ACCAN's website (www.accan.org.au/grants).

Feedback from participants

After an open discussion, SBAF attendees identified the following communications as priority issues for their constituents in the year ahead:

- Affordability
 - Cost and speed (high cost but slow speeds)
 - Lack of competition
 - Pricing/billing is inflexible
 - Plans/costs hard to compare
 - Conflicting information on costs and inclusions

- Access to 3/4G and high speed broadband
 - Unprofitable communities being neglected by providers; they have to 'make do' with inferior technology
 - Mobile black spots
 - Congestion – internet crashes during peak periods (shift knock off time)
 - Local issues need to be taken into consideration (holiday towns, mining)
 - No ports available and no upgrade because NBN is coming

- NBN
 - High speed broadband costs are a lot higher than equivalent ADSL services; the assumption is that small business will need to pay more for the speeds required to undertake business
 - Businesses and communities need 'champions' to see them through the transition and implementation of the NBN rollout
 - Information needs to be more widely available, earlier, from a credible agency, not service providers in a consumer friendly language and format
 - There is a lack of understanding that voice services currently provided by the copper network will no longer be available after the NBN implementation
 - There is currently a lack of end to end responsibility
 - Confusion regarding a solution for multi-tenancy buildings such as in industrial areas and other businesses sharing premises

- Limiting innovation/take up of digital processes
 - Farmers finding it hard to keep up and be competitive with inadequate telecommunication services
 - Digital illiteracy is an emergent issue and already affecting business
 - Education programs needed to convert technical ability into opportunity. Businesses don't always see the opportunities and potential of online services
 - Fear of the risk from data breaches, scams, malware
 - Community hubs to be made available for emergency use for business in the event that they have no internet access. Essential functions such as payroll, BAS lodgement and banking could still be done

- Challenges/frustrations
 - Government services pushing small business to go online, e.g. for standard business reporting. However, businesses are hampered by expensive, unreliable or non-existent services. They need better, faster broadband
 - Storefronts for banks, government services closing
 - Social issues around access to fast broadband – second class citizen if you do not have access, perception that business/business owner is poor
 - Copyright filtering/blocking of websites – three strike rule catastrophic for small business
 - Issues around software subscription renewal/cloud. Subscribers have already paid for access to software updates. They don't want to pay for access to cloud software on top of that
 - Small businesses continue to have to fight for poorly placed services
 - Providers need to communicate in the consumers 'language'
 - Lack of confidence in the future of their business due to external factors such as drought, mining shutdown etc

- Suggestions for ACCAN
 - Tip sheet recommended for Wi-Fi security (in consumer language)

Future Research

- What's really happening?...Unrealised demand in rural and farming communities
- Cybersecurity
 - Real life experience and the impact on small business
 - Internet of Things (IoT)
 - Cybersecurity and commerce (NFC, free Wi-Fi , Apple passbook)

Suggested Outreach Opportunities

- NBN Transition – follow NBN around the nation and provide communities with consumer education products/information. Information should be available in mainstream media
- Stalls at trade shows/farm days
- Join other organisation's events
- Targeted pieces of information to groups like Australian Trucking, Master Builders and Retailers Association
- Communicate small business issues regarding emerging trends
- Using social media profiles of SBAF attendees to share information

Conclusion

The feedback and suggestions made today will be used to complement ACCAN's policy priorities, operations plan and research activity plan. Once these have been finalised they will be circulated to SBAF attendees.

It was also noted that a review of ACCAN's Strategic Plan will be completed over the next 12 months. This includes a contract review conducted by the Department of Communications.

ACCAN CEO, Teresa Corbin, thanked the participants of the inaugural SBAF, for both their time and valuable contributions.