



## **Standing Advisory Committee Consumer Affairs Meeting Report**

*Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> June 2012 10.00am – 4.00 pm*

**Members present:** Jo Benvenuti – Consumer Utilities Advocacy Centre  
Ian Butterworth – Telecommunications Consumer Group, SA  
Andrew Crouch – Centre for Appropriate Technology  
Rachel Milfull – Financial Counselling Australia  
Karin Ness – Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre  
Johanna Plante – Chair, ACCAN Board  
Victoria Rubensohn  
John Wood

The Chair welcomed members to the second meeting of the Standing Advisory Committee on Consumer Affairs (SACCA) in 2012 and acknowledged the traditional owners of the land.

### **Australian Energy Market (AER) monitoring and enforcement**

The Committee discussed AER monitoring and enforcement, drawing lessons about consumer advocacy from the example. Members considered the limitations of privately operated product comparison tools, noting that there is no independent comparison switching site for telecommunications products. The Committee felt that is difficult to present information in a way consumers can identify a product and compare it with others easily, especially when products are packaged in ways that make them difficult to compare.

### **Review of local call charging according to distance**

Members discussed boundaries for local-calls from landline phones, raising concerns that it is hard to determine where a boundary is and if it is still a relevant reflection of a local area. The Committee agreed that local-call zoning and charging is a long-term issue and that as communities have changed since the last review some boundary areas have lost their relevance. Local-call zones will have less relevance as the NBN rolls out and voice services move to VoIP systems.

### **Limited access to NBN interim Satellite Service**

The Committee discussed the interim NBN Co Satellite service which some customers are eligible for instead of the Australian Broadband Guarantee. The Committee recognised the need to limit the number of customers eligible for the higher quality interim service but felt that the strict eligibility criteria missed some core groups of consumers, particularly indigenous communities who use a satellite service for multiple community computers.

### **Misleading and deceptive advertising and hardship case study**

A member referred ACCAN to a possible case of misleading or deceptive advertising. ACCAN agreed to investigate further, possibly referring the case to the ACCC for action. The member also raised two case studies about telco hardship policies. ACCAN encouraged members to refer case studies to contribute to ACCAN's evidence base. There was a brief discussion about the need to work towards a standard set of criteria for hardship for all telecommunications products.

### **Charging for mobile number porting**

Members discussed the Optus \$8 fee to port a phone number to another service and agreed to follow the matter up.

### **Silent line charging**

Currently consumers are charged about \$6-8 per month to obtain a silent line (i.e. a private landline number which is not listed in directory services, some services also include caller ID blocking). This issue has been considered by the Australian Law Reform Commission who recommended that the charges be abolished. The Committee considered how ACCAN could progress this issue. Members felt ACCAN should work with women's organisations to understand the importance of silent numbers and that charges should be eliminated for all cases rather than be made situation specific.

### **Missed call alerts on mobile phones**

The Committee considered what the most appropriate default for missed call alerts should be when a consumer has not activated a voice mail service for their mobile phone. The Committee felt that transparency was very important and that all services should notify callers that they will be charged if they choose to proceed and leave a message using missed call alert services. They felt that the system was confusing, especially as handsets often offer a free missed call notification.

### **Copyright**

The Committee considered options for ACCAN to develop a position on copyright, raising concerns that strong ideological stances of different groups on the matter make it difficult to create a general consumer position. Further difficulty arises due to a growing number of individual consumers creating copyrighted material, the cost and availability of content in the Australian market, and commercial pirates profiting from mass production of illegal materials. ACCAN originally became interested in copyright issues because there was a possibility of ISPs being forced to disconnect consumers accused of (but not necessarily proved to be) downloading content illegally. Members felt that ACCAN should develop a paper for the current government inquiry into copyright, focusing on the principles behind copyright and the anachronisms in legislation.

### **IT pricing inquiry**

Members discussed the upcoming inquiry into IT pricing, recommending that ACCAN look at design and computer protection software.

### **Briefings**

Members were provided with briefings on:

- Upcoming ACCAN research projects
- The 2012-13 ACCAN grants projects
- The ACCAN Review
- The Telecommunications Consumer Protection Code Review
- Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman Review and governance
- ACCAN's Fair Calls For All campaign