

Numbering set for overhaul in Australia

The increasing use of mobile phones, the impact of voice over internet protocol (VoIP) services and the widespread use of capped and bundled plans are posing important questions for the way traditional telephone numbers are managed, according to the first in a series of consultation papers released in October by the ACMA.

Numbering has become a key issue in Australia's converged communications environment. The series of consultation papers to be released by the ACMA will consider how we build a bridge between current uses of numbers and how communications services will use numbers in the near future.

The Numbering Plan, which sets out rules for the use and administration of telephone numbers, was last substantively reviewed in the lead up to the liberalisation of the telecommunications market in 1997. At this time, Australia was mid-way through changing to 10-digit numbers, and mobile phones were primarily only used by professionals.

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Numbering plays a significant part in many facets of telecommunications policy and regulation, including in the delivery of consumer safeguards. For example, telephone numbers have been relied on by consumers to reveal the cost of a call or the location of a person or business they are calling. Numbers are also integral to emergency service organisations as they use them to obtain location details of a person calling Triple Zero from a landline phone.

The first consultation paper examines the underlying structure of the Numbering Plan and the pressures that are placed on traditional numbering-based approaches. Some of these pressures include:

- > the increasing replacement of landline phones by mobile phones as the preferred device for making phone calls
- > the decline in importance of distance-based charging for calls, as consumers move to capped plans and bundled services that include large allowances of calls from either their home or mobile phones
- > the ease with which VoIP allows a consumer's phone service to move across the traditional geographic boundaries used for landline numbers, a trend that is likely to increase as voice services become merely another internet application
- > the availability of diverse forms of electronic communications—voice, video, messaging, social media, email—in which the primacy of telephone services in communications is showing signs of decline.

In the first consultation paper, the ACMA is seeking views on how the Numbering Plan can or should be adapted to the needs of a convergent environment, including:

- > the role that numbers can and should play in future as a vehicle for addressing policy concerns and objectives
- > whether the present division of phone numbers between more than 40 different types of communications services, including mobile, landline, satellite and VoIP phones, should be simplified
- > whether the present division of numbers for landline phones between more than 2,000 geographic areas—historically used for calculating the cost of long distance/STD calls—should be simplified
- > whether rules formulated when landline phones were the predominant means of making calls are still relevant—for example, rules restricting the level of charge for landline calls to freephone (1800) and local rate (13) numbers, but not for mobile calls
- > how best to facilitate transparency of call charges, and whether numbers should play a role in facilitating that transparency.

It is intended that the other consultation papers in the series will examine:

- > the administration of numbering, institutional arrangements supporting this administration, and the role of numbers in industry taxation and charging arrangements
- > how customer, location and service provider information derived from numbers is used by end-users, communications providers, emergency service organisations and law enforcement agencies
- > the use of information in numbers to provide safeguards to end-users. ☎

Submissions

Submissions and comments in response to the paper close on 3 December 2010.

Submissions should be sent via email to number.project@acma.gov.au or by mail to:

Manager
Numbering Project
Australian Communications
and Media Authority
PO Box 13112
Law Courts
Melbourne VIC 8010

The first consultation paper is available from the ACMA website at www.acma.gov.au (go to About ACMA: News & media centre > Issues for comment > IFC 36/2010).

Figure 1: Role of numbers in fulfilling policy objectives

