Telecoms Complaints Data

Ofcom receives and monitors complaints from consumers who are dissatisfied with their experience in the communications sector. It uses this data both to take enforcement action against specific companies that are breaking existing Ofcom rules and also to highlight problem areas where new rules may be needed to protect consumers.

The chart below shows complaint trends for key areas of consumer dissatisfaction over the last 13 months.

Mis-selling/Slamming – Fixed line

In some instances consumers may be given incorrect or misleading information to encourage them to switch providers.

Consumers who receive false or misleading information by a phone company to convince them to switch telephone supplier have been “mis-sold” the service. Additionally if a consumer receives a bill from a company they haven’t signed up to, it’s possible they’ve been “slammed”. In other words, the new company has switched their account without first obtaining their permission. Ofcom has introduced rules to strengthen the regulations around mis-selling.

Ofcom actively monitors compliance with these rules through its enforcement programme and takes action against companies who do not comply with the regulations. Ofcom has previously taken enforcement action against providers who have been found to be in breach of sales and marketing rules, including fining two companies the maximum 10 per cent of their turnover.

Complaints about fixed line mis-selling/slamming can be registered here.

Silent Calls

The vast majority of silent calls are not made by pranksters or burglars. In fact they are simply the work of a machine, called a predictive dialler, used by call centres to phone large numbers of people in one go.
Predictive diallers are used by telemarketing firms, by market research firms, by debt collection agencies and many other types of company. They work by dialling telephone numbers automatically, then connecting the customer to a call centre agent as soon as the customer answers the phone.

If all the call centre agents are busy when the customer answers the phone, there’s nobody free at the other end of the line when the customer picks up the receiver. So, as a result, the customer simply hears silence, and can be concerned or frightened as a result.

Technology used by call centre operators to detect answer machines can also mistake a ‘live’ consumer for an answering machine and cut off the call without the person hearing anything, resulting in a silent call.

Ofcom has rules regarding the use of diallers and has an enforcement programme to make sure organisations are complying with the rules. Ofcom has taken formal enforcement action against silent and abandoned calls, and has fined companies such as Abbey National, Barclaycard and Carphone Warehouse.

Ofcom also introduced new rules to stamp out repeat silent calls, where consumers receive more than one silent call from the same company. The new rules will prevent a company using answer machine detection equipment more than once a day if an answer machine is ‘detected’ on the first attempt.

Last year, Ofcom issued notifications to Homeserve, nPower and TalkTalk.

Complaints about receiving silent calls can be registered here.

Customer Services

Ofcom receives complaints about communications providers’ customer service including: queue times, no response to letters or emails, refusal to escalate complaints, quality of and rude staff and incorrect information given.

Most communications providers view customer service as a key component of their operations and will endeavour to treat their customers fairly. Ofcom’s role is to ensure that when something goes wrong consumers are able to find out easily how to make a complaint and can be assured that their provider will have appropriate processes in place to receive and handle their complaint.

Ofcom requires all providers have complaints handling procedures that conform to the Ofcom Approved Code of Practice for Complaints Handling (http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/telecoms/ga/complaints-handling-code.pdf ) and to be members of an Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) scheme, where their customers can take disputes after 8 weeks have passed. In addition, new rules to improve consumers’ awareness of ADR come into force in July 2011.

Advice for consumers on how to complain about their communications provider can be found here: http://consumers.ofcom.org.uk/tell-us/telecoms/.

Additional Charges
Consumers are sometimes required to pay additional amounts over and above the headline prices they expect. For example, most contracts are of a minimum length and include an early termination charge to end a contract early. These types of charges are allowed but they must be fair.

Ofcom opened an enforcement programme on 1 April 2009 to make sure companies are complying with the law. In 2010 Ofcom agreed with BT, Talk Talk and Virgin Media that they would reduce the charges they levy to consumers for leaving their landline (or landline plus broadband) contracts early.

Complaints about additional charges can be made by calling the Ofcom Advisory Team on 0300 123 3333.

**Broadband Speeds**

Many ISPs market their broadband products with headline speeds such as ‘up to 8, 20 or 24 Mbit/s’. However, the vast majority of these consumers are unlikely to receive these headlines speeds which in turn can lead to dissatisfaction.

Ofcom has recently strengthened the voluntary Code of Practice on broadband speeds. ISPs who have signed up to the revised Code commit to give consumers a more accurate and consistent estimate of the maximum speed likely to be achievable on their line. ISPs also commit to help consumers improve their speeds and give consumers the option to leave their contracts early without penalty (within three months of signing up to the service) if they receive a maximum line speed that is significantly below the estimate they are given at point of sale and the ISP is unable to resolve the problem. The strengthened Code covers over 90 per cent of consumers and came into force on 27 July 2011.

Ofcom also publishes extensive speeds research that provides insights into the speeds actually achieved by consumers using broadband services.

**Mis-selling/Slamming – Mobile**

The term ‘mis-selling’ covers a range of misleading or aggressive sales and marketing activities including ‘slamming’, where customers are simply switched from one company to another without their express knowledge and consent.

Ofcom has strengthened rules on mis-selling in the mobile market and companies can be fined up to 10 per cent of their relevant turnover if they are found to be breaking the rules.

Complaints about mobile mis-selling can be made by calling the Ofcom Advisory Team on 0300 123 3333.