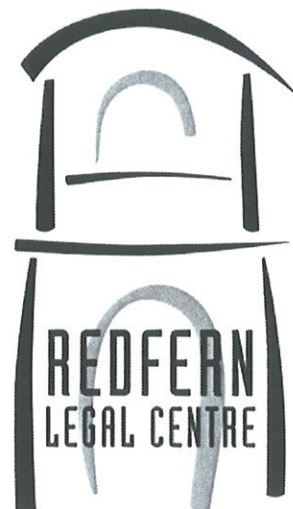


Redfern Legal Centre



28 October 2011

Consumer Policy and Post
Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy
GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Attention: Simon Cobcroft

Dear Mr Cobcroft

Review of the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

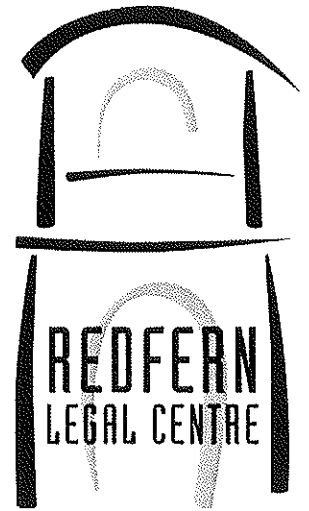
Please find attached our policy submission: *Connecting Consumers: A Review of the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network*

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to further discuss our submission.

Yours faithfully,
Redfern Legal Centre


Elizabeth Morley
Principal Solicitor

Redfern Legal Centre



SUBMISSION:

Connecting Consumers: A Review of the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

AUTHOR: Elizabeth Morley

DATE: 28 October 2011

1. Introduction: Redfern Legal Centre

Redfern Legal Centre (RLC) is an independent, non-profit, community-based legal organisation with a prominent profile in the Redfern area.

RLC has a particular focus on human rights and social justice. Our specialist areas of work are domestic violence, tenancy, credit and debt, employment, discrimination and complaints about police and other governmental agencies. By working collaboratively with key partners, RLC specialist lawyers and advocates provide free advice, conduct case work, deliver community legal education and write publications and submissions. RLC works towards reforming our legal system for the benefit of the community.

2. RLC's experience of telecommunications issues

Redfern Legal Centre has over the years had many clients with problems involving telecommunications, from matters of simple over- commitment through to matters involving unfair marketing and unsuitable products. Common themes emerge as to:

- (a) the individual's inability to negotiate and achieve reasonable outcomes;
- (b) continuing concerns about the marketing of telecommunications products;
- (c) the individuals lack of awareness of aspects of the products or billing and subsequent inability to control costs;
- (d) the delays and difficulties in dealing with complaints;
- (e) a high level of low income persons being disconnected from access frequently and for sustained periods; and
- (g) the affordability of access to services and participation generally where telecommunications is the point of access.

This is in a context where increasingly society is organizing itself around being connected via telecommunications at all times and in all places for products, information, participation in debate and comment, education and entertainment. Government and business agencies increasingly rely on their community access and information being by telecommunications. In the name of productivity and savings, the ability to call and speak with a local person or drop into a local office is becoming replaced by websites and call centres. When consumers do call they spend long periods in queues or getting through automated answering systems.

Our clients are increasingly dependant on mobile telephones as their sole connection point and are frequently without credit. Staying connected is a challenge when they cannot afford to complete the call.

3. RLC's view in summary

RLC welcomes the opportunity to comment on Australian Communications Consumer

Action Network's (ACCAN's) effectiveness in representing consumers in telecommunications issues.

RLC values the work done by ACCAN in addressing the systemic issues underlying our clients' individual issues. By being a national consumer body with specialized knowledge of the telecommunications industry and regulatory environment, they are able to draw the on the ground experience of their member organizations into a co-ordinated response.

We consider that ACCAN plays an essential role in maintaining a fair and equitable access to what remains an essential rather than optional service.

4. RLC's recommendation

RLC recommends that ACCAN be supported into the future and that it be supported in at least its current if not expanded levels.

5. Responses to specific Issues

5 (1) The effectiveness of ACCAN in representing and harnessing its constituent bodies and representatives to support and actively participate in the work of the organisation

RLC recognises that the right of consumers to fair, affordable and accessible communications as a key issue. Despite great advances in communications, many Australian consumers do not enjoy access to the essential services required to participate fully in society. RLC supports ACCAN's campaign to ensure access to essential communications for all consumers.

Recent activities of ACCAN illustrate how much work the organisation does to facilitate and provide a consumer voice in ongoing industry regulatory matters as well as in campaigns to drive a fairer outcomes for consumers. Work done around customer service and complaints and more recently around access to 1800 and 1300 numbers for mobile customers illustrate broad based issues affecting all consumers. RLC has itself made submissions on some of these issues. For these submissions see our website www.rlc.org.au

While RLC itself has direct experience of the problems faced by consumers, it has little time to monitor the telecommunications industry on a daily basis and respond to or address every inquiry or working group despite the importance of the outcome to what access our clients will have. ACCAN fills that gap for us and our clients.

5 (2) ACCAN's strategic policy direction. This includes consideration of ACCAN's Strategic Plan 2010–15 and how activities and consumer grants awarded by ACCAN fulfil ACCAN's policy objectives.

We have confidence that under the Strategic Plan ACCAN will continue to deliver useful

outcomes such that telecommunications will be a solution towards an inclusive and successful society rather than part of the problem.

Solid research from the consumer perspective is beyond the capacity of most service organisations such as ours. ACCAN has continued to undertake research and produce useful information. This research addresses the needs of particular consumer groups such as those with complex communications needs and of consumer more generally such in the recent report, *Seeking Straight Answers: Consumer decision-making*. The Australian communications infrastructure and system will be less than effective if this work is not factored into future development.

5 (3) ACCAN's performance in promoting consumer awareness of telecommunications issues and in being recognised as the peak telecommunications consumer body. In particular:

RLC supports ACCAN's educational role in the community. ACCAN publishes a number of resources to help consumers stay informed about communications issues and developments. Published tip sheets and other helpful resource, for example the jargon buster, provides consumers with help on how to navigate through changing technology and policy, and how to make informed choices about communications.

ACCAN works well in maintaining its links with members. It maintains an updated website with information about current telecommunications issues expressed in clear language. We recommend ACCAN be conscious in its communications however that consumers come in many forms and the most vulnerable frequently have little resources to afford the connection cost and many more lack functional literacy in dealing with the printed word.

5 (4) The appropriateness and effectiveness of ACCAN's current governance arrangements.

RLC notes that ACCAN has a structure that also includes advisory committees. This structure overall provides for good governance and strategic direction while allowing for inclusion of a wider range of consumer representative input.

Redfern Legal Centre notes that the current Board of ACCAN includes members with relevant skills in community and industry issues and organisation governance. We respect the calibre of people involved in the Board or advisory committees and indeed welcome the considerable experience of consumer issues and advocacy they bring. RLC expresses it's appreciation of the time and commitment those persons give to ACCAN and the issues it takes on.

We note that ACCAN is a national organisation and represents regional and remote consumers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse consumers, etc. A scan of the Board and Advisory Committees indicates the majority of persons are from the East Coast, and either represent broad consumer interest and/or disability interests. ACCAN needs to be ever mindful that it has strategies to actively

engage a broad range of consumers across the country in developing its strategic plans and activities. This inclusion can be achieved in many ways other than attendance on boards or committees.

ACCAN could not achieve what it does if it did not use its resources wisely and with care.