

Launch of **connect.resolve** public report

Address by Ombudsman Deirdre O'Donnell

Thank you to Virginia Hickey, Independent Chair of the TIO Council. Thank you very much to Senator Conroy for his attendance here today. And welcome to members of the media in attendance.

My aim this afternoon is to provide some context for and comments on the report we are launching this afternoon, and then to hand over to the Minister to officially launch the TIO's *connect.resolve* final report.

I will start by briefly recapping the TIO's role and why we initiated this campaign.

- We are an independent office of last resort
- We are a free, informal alternative dispute resolution scheme
- We help around 5 and a half thousand Australians every week who have tried to resolve their complaint with their mobile, landline or internet service provider and have come to us to seek our assistance. Most contact us by phone, but email is also an increasingly important avenue.

Why the *connect.resolve* campaign?

- For over the past two years we have been highlighting first the growth in complaints to the TIO, and second the growth in complaints about customer service matters in particular.
- This category of complaint topped our traditional number one category (billing-related complaints) for two years in a row.
- We have received unacceptably high levels of complaints about customers getting "the run around".
- Many of these complaints were about simple matters that could be addressed by system or process changes, or by concentrating on the front line – where the explicit aim for customer service staff is to get it right first time.

The TIO deliberately chose to focus on customer voices in this campaign. What that meant was that as well as providing monthly statistics, we also provided examples of customer voices to each of the companies involved in the campaign. It is worth acknowledging that the voices represent the consumer's perspective – but that is where their value lies – these perspectives inevitably colour the consumer's relationship with their service provider, and as we know, often go on to influence others, through word of mouth, in a way that can affect customer loyalty and retention. These are both factors that we believe achieve even more prominence in tough economic times.

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What we did.

We chose to focus on our top 10 members because collectively they represent around 90% of complaints to the TIO. Even though as a scheme we have almost 1000 members, we wanted to focus on the area that could potentially yield the greatest results.

For six months, from January to June, we gave detailed reports to our top 10 members.

Providing monthly data that illustrated common areas of complaint for each company, along with whole of industry data, allowed the senior management of those companies to receive business intelligence that could be useful for identifying patterns of customer experience that could be readily addressed. The accompanying voices gave a human dimension to the statistics.

We also offered assistance along the way, and actively engaged with our members with the aim of helping them improve their complaint handling.

Over the life of the campaign, we saw an increase in total complaints of 1.8%. This compares to 46% growth in the previous year and a similar level in the year before. At that level, there has been an improvement that needs to be acknowledged.

However, there is still much work to be done to reduce the quantum of complaints that fall into the customer service category. That means that the TIO will continue to collaborate with the companies themselves, as well as with all our key stakeholders.

I would like to thank each of the companies who took part in the campaign and who demonstrated good faith and a cooperative approach in addressing our shared goal.

I would like to echo the Chair of Council's thanks to our key regulatory, consumer and industry stakeholders, and to the Minister's Department.

And finally, I would like to take this opportunity to publicly acknowledge those TIO staff who contributed to this initiative. I am very proud of the enormous effort that has gone into the campaign and the dedication and commitment of TIO staff to achieving better outcomes for telecommunications consumers.

In respect of today's report, I would specifically like to acknowledge the work of Shobini Mahendra, who commenced the campaign, and to Kate Eadie who has managed it to its conclusion and done a superb job. I must also single out Baris Tansel for the statistics and Monica Clements for the voices – both integral to the relevance of the reports we provided to our top 10 companies. Finally I would like to thank John DuBois for all his work in organising today's launch.

I am now delighted to hand over to Senator Stephen Conroy, Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy and Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate, to officially launch the report of the TIO's *connect.resolve* campaign.

After the Minister's speech, I will be available to answer any questions about the report.

Thank you.

Deirdre O'Donnell
Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman
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