

Hall of shame

These are organisations that have expensive customer lines

0871

Admiral Insurance, Bell Insurance, Diamond Insurance, Elephant Insurance, Nikon, Tiscali

0870

Apple (tech support)^a, Carphone Warehouse/Talk Talk, DVLA, Gladiator Insurance, Lexmark, Philips^a, Sony, Zanussi-Electrolux

0844

AOL, Orange, Panasonic^a, Sky^b, TV Licensing

0845

Barclays, British Gas, Churchill^a, Consumer Direct, Direct Line, Eon, Green Flag, Halifax, Lloyds TSB, Miele, Npower, Philips^a, Scottish and Southern Energy^a, Scottish Power, TV Licensing, Virgin Media

Roll of honour

These are companies that have cheaper customer lines

0800

Apple (helpline)^a, BT, Canon, Churchill^a, Dyson, Norwich Union Direct, RAC, Scottish and Southern Energy^a

03

Passport Office (from August)

01/02

Panasonic^a, Philips^a, Toshiba

^a Has both normal and higher-rate numbers
^b Free for Sky Talk customers from July



Stop these rip-off calls

We first looked at higher-rate helplines a year ago. Companies are still using them to make money at your expense

This month, Which? names and shames companies and government agencies using expensive phone helplines to rack up profits at your expense.

These bodies use higher-charging numbers 0871, 0870, 0844 and 0845 for customer service or technical support lines.

Currently, organisations can share money made from such calls with the phone-service provider – the longer you're on the line, the more they earn. The DVLA, for example, made £3.4 million from its 0870 number in the last financial year.

Changes planned

Phones regulator Ofcom has announced plans to stop organisations making money from 0870 numbers as part of a wider review of higher-rate numbers.

It's cutting the cost of calls to 0870 numbers so they will cost no more than calling a geographic number (01 or 02) or a new 03 code. It also wants such numbers to be included in call packages.

The new 03 code that Ofcom has introduced costs the same as 01 or 02 to call but isn't linked to a specific area. Some organisations like a non-geographic number as it stays the same even if they move offices.

Confusingly, companies will still be able to charge more on an 0870 number if there is a message at the start of the call warning of this. Ofcom hopes to introduce the

changes by autumn. We contacted more than 40 companies and government agencies to find out what numbers they are using.

We found that some are sticking with the 0870 numbers that are, for now, still earning them money. Some have switched to cheaper numbers, but others have switched to other higher-charging codes. We found that none had so far switched to 03.

Our findings

■ Orange has an 09 number (50p a minute) for broadband technical support for some customers.

■ Nikon and Tiscali have switched from 0870 to 0871 – just as expensive to call.

■ Apple, Sony and Carphone Warehouse/TalkTalk use 0870 for some or all helplines.

■ Energy firm Eon has switched from 0800 (free to call from a landline) to 0845 claiming: 'A freephone number is not a service valued by our customers.'

■ Canon, RAC Insurance and Toshiba have switched from 0870 to 0800 or a (cheaper) geographic number.

■ BT, which had 0845 numbers for technical support, has switched to 0800.

Government agencies

TV Licensing and Consumer Direct are both keeping 0844 or 0845 numbers. A TV Licensing spokesman said: 'If we provided free phone calls, less money would go to BBC programmes and services.' Consumer

Eon said: 'A freephone number is not a service valued by our customers'

SKY'S THE LIMIT

Cheryl Scott 46, business consultant

It took Cheryl Scott more than half an hour on an 0870 number (costing £2.16) to solve a problem with Sky. Cheryl had to move out of her East Sussex home last summer when it was damaged by floods. She called the customer service line to ask for her £45-a-month Sky TV+ package to be suspended. Cheryl couldn't believe it when she was told she would still have to pay £20 a month – a special deal for flood victims.

She wasn't happy and, after some argument, said she wanted to cancel. After 20 minutes, she was put through to a supervisor and had the same argument. She was then told £20 had already been taken in a direct debit from her account. She asked the supervisor to cancel her contract. Eventually, she was offered a £2-a-month plan by the original staff member, which she accepted.

Cheryl said: 'It was one of the most frustrating calls I have ever had and all at my own expense.'

A Sky spokesman apologised for Cheryl's inconvenience and said she should have been offered the £2-a-month plan from the start.



Checklist

Avoid paying premium rates

- Companies with premium numbers may have cheaper alternatives. See saynoto0870.com.
- Try ringing the head office, speak to customer services or email them.
- If your call is because a product is faulty or the company hasn't fulfilled its contract, ask it to refund the call cost. Contact the phone company and request it suspends the disputed part of your bill until the problem is resolved.
- When Which? gives company details, we give geographic or freephone numbers if possible.
- Which? still has some 0845 numbers. But they don't earn us money, are cheaper for a very few users – and we are phasing them out. Our principal numbers start 020 and 01992.

Direct, has cheaper numbers but said it would be 'confusing' to publicise them. It said that switching to a new number would mean costly marketing. The DVLA said it will switch to 03 but hasn't said when.

What the calls cost you

We looked at the most common landline charges: for a ten-minute call you can pay up to £1 calling an 0871/0870 number; 60p calling an 0845 number; and 50p calling an 0844 number. A ten-minute call to 01, 02 or the new 03 code, costs 40p at most. It's often cheaper as such numbers may be part of your inclusive minutes, so

It took BT more than 18 minutes to answer one of our calls

would be free or discounted. 08 codes aren't usually included.

Phone a higher-charge number from a mobile and a ten-minute call costs up to £4. We found you pay up to £3 to call 0800 – these calls are free from a landline.

Why are we waiting?

We looked at how long customers are kept on hold on helplines. The average wait varied between 26 seconds and more than three minutes (see below).

One call to BT's broadband (freephone) helpline took more than 18 minutes before a conversation start-ed. A call to an AOL

0844 number was held for 15 minutes before contact was made, at a cost of 75p, using a BT landline. The DVLA kept us waiting for more than ten minutes on an 0870 number.

Energy companies were more than a minute and a half quicker than we found when we did the same survey last year.

OUR RESEARCH

We called 18 organisations between nine and 13 times each to measure the average time for each we had to wait before speaking to someone.

WHY ARE WE WAITING?

Here are the average shortest and longest times we had to wait to speak to someone

Broadband	Government	Utilities
BEST	BEST	BEST
Global 0 min 34 secs	Consumer Direct 0 min 26 secs	Southern Electric 1 min 40 secs
WORST	WORST	WORST
AOL 3 min 4 secs	DVLA 3 min 16 secs	British Gas 2 min 50 secs



Which? says

More action needed

We welcome Ofcom's proposals, but more should be done.

- All companies should switch their helplines and technical support from expensive numbers (not just 0870) and use 03, 0800 or 01/02 codes instead.
- 0800 calls should be free on mobiles as well as landlines.