

BREAKING

THE CODE

0845 and 0870 calls cost more than you think

Our survey

In January we carried out an online survey of 1,043 adults. We asked them whether it's cheaper, more expensive or the same to make a 10-minute call to an 0845 number instead of an 01 or 02 one, from a BT landline to another part of the UK at the weekend. We then asked the same question about an 0870 number.

Just 29 per cent correctly said that 01 and 02 numbers would be cheaper than an 0845 number. And 47 per cent wrongly thought that the 0845 number would be cheaper. Of the rest, 13 per cent said they'd cost the same and a similar number said they didn't know.

With the 0870 number, 45 per cent correctly said that the 01 and 02 numbers would be cheaper. But more than 20 per cent wrongly thought 0870 was cheaper.

Next time you call a customer service centre, and are left on hold listening to a voice telling you how much your call means to the company, think about how much it's costing you.

When they were first introduced in the 1990s, 0845 (lo-call) and 0870 (national-rate) numbers matched BT's local- and national-rate call charges. But now, as the table shows, these numbers are effectively charged at premium rates. For example, a 20-minute call to an 0870 helpline in the evening costs 75p from a BT phone. That's 13

times more than it costs to make an identical call to a geographic number (one starting 01 or 02) with BT's Together 1 option. With the exception of some cable customers, who may still find it cheaper to use 0845 numbers at certain times, 08 numbers provide little benefit to consumers.

This is because BT recently changed its tariffs bringing them into line with those of other operators. Under its Together 1 option, the line rental is increased but customers are charged a flat rate of 5.5p for off-peak calls lasting up to an hour. So now there's no difference between calling someone just down the road or 200 miles away for a minute or an hour. But 08 numbers don't benefit from these discounts or from the free calls offered in mobile phone monthly contract packages.

Some companies, such as charity appeals and information lines, use 08 numbers to generate money for themselves. For example, pay-as-you-go internet service providers (ISPs) tend to use 0845 numbers as a simple way to charge you for the service you use without having to send out bills and sign you up to contracts. But making money out of people calling an 0870 number to complain to a customer service department, for example, is less ethical, especially if they're kept waiting in a call queue system costing around 8p a minute.

Ofcom, the telecoms regulator, is aware of the problems and is consulting on measures to solve them. We'll keep you posted. But, in the meantime, companies with call centres should play a part, too. We now publish our 01 number alongside our 0845 number so that you can call us for less. We want others to do the same, and for companies that do use 0870 numbers to make it clear how much calls will cost and how long they're likely to last. ■

Call costs compared

Call costs compared	Type of call		Price (pence per minute)		
	Number	Package (line rental applies)	Daytime (p)	Weekday evening (p)	Weekend (p)
BT ^a	0845	all	3	1	1
	0870	all	7.51	3.75	1.5
	geographic calls	BT Together 1	3	5.5 for 1 hr ^b	5.5 for 1 hr ^b
		BT Together 2	3	free ^b	free ^b
		BT Together 3	free ^c	free ^b	free ^b
NTL ^d	0845	all	4.45	1.75	1.45
	0870	all	8.1	4.3	2.75
	geographic calls	321 standard	3	2	1
		5 p talk plan	3	5 for 1 hr ^e	5 for 1 hr ^e
		Talk Unlimited 24	free	free	free
Telewest ^f	0845	all	3.95	1.49	1
	0870	all	7.91	3.95	2.95
	geographic calls	Talk weekends	4	2	free
		Talk evening & weekend	4	free	free
		Talk unlimited	free	free	free

^a BT has a minimum call charge of 5p unless listed as free ^b Price for calls lasting up to one hour, then 1p a minute ^c Price for calls up to one hour, then 3p a minute ^d NTL charges a 5p connection charge on calls except those listed as free ^e Price for calls up to one hour, then 2p a minute in the evening, 1p a minute at weekends ^f Telewest charges a 6p connection charge on all calls except those listed as free