

Phone rip-offs – who are you going to call for help?

Worried you've been stung by an expensive phone scam? George Kidd, Director of premium-rate watchdog Icstis, wants to know



George Kidd: 'We're the regulator. We want to know'

Q They can cost anything from 10p to £1.50 a minute to call, so what is a premium-rate number?

A A premium-rate number is anything where you're paying a premium on top of the cost of a normal call and you're going to get some content or service as a result. So it can be a weather report, it can be votes for *Big Brother*. They're relatively low-value items and sometimes meet a social need – the chat, the date, the

opportunity to win something. For the kids it's to have the latest wallpaper, the latest video clip, the latest ringtone.

Q What can consumers do if they've been the victim of a premium-rate scam?

A Tell us [See 'Contacts', right]. We're the regulator, we want to know. With a premium-rate scam, if it's affecting you, it's probably also affecting a thousand other people.

Q You are reviewing TV quiz shows that use premium-rate numbers – why?

A We've got a number of concerns but I would boil them down to understanding – understanding the price, the proposition, the fact you're going to pay whether you get through to the studio or not – and the odds of winning. I think the price bit of it largely is addressed – you cannot go 59 seconds on these programmes without being told the price. The odds bit of it has got to be addressed. The conduct bit of it is generally robust – people are not playing around changing the answers to the question.

Q What do you think is the biggest premium-rate problem that consumers face at the moment?

A It's been diverse this year – the most high profile one was the *Big Brother* episode where they changed the rules halfway through the programme and thousands of people complained about feeling misled [more than 2,500 people complained after using a premium-rate phone service to vote out a contestant, only for the person concerned to be brought back into the show by *Big Brother*'s producers at a later date].

Q You took action over *Big Brother* but you didn't fine the company. Why not?

A No, there wasn't a fine. But there were very considerable administrative costs – I think effectively the charge to the company was in the region of £30,000 to £40,000 as a result of what it did. We had to try to find a balance because the intent was not to scam the public out of its money – the intent was to keep up interest and make the programme attractive. We said: 'Learn your lesson, pay your costs and move on.'

Q How do you think the market will develop?

A I think as a payment mechanism it has huge potential. I don't want to use my credit card to spend £3.50 or a tenner even, so I think there is a space where people want to make micro-payments for distance purchases. If you ask a kid about their most important possession it's their mobile phone. All of that says it's got huge potential.

CONTACTS

To complain about a number beginning 090 or 091, a 118 directory enquiry service or reverse-billed SMS operating on shortcodes, call Icstis on 0800 500212 or complain online at www.icstis.org.uk