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Re proposed amendments to the Telecommunications (Consumer Complaints Handling) Industry Standard

Aussie Broadband Limited (Aussie Broadband) welcomes the opportunity to review and provide feedback on the proposed amendments to the Telecommunications (Consumer Complaints Handling) Industry Standard and the Consultation paper published by the ACMA.

Definition of ‘complaint’

Aussie Broadband has some concerns with the amendments to the definition of a complaint under the draft Standard. We believe that the amended definition introduces unnecessary complexity with limited consumer benefit. It is our interpretation that under the new definition, two new pathways are created; a customer raises a fault or service difficulty, and this will either be categorised as a ‘network outage complaint’, or a ‘service outage report’. These two distinctions are in addition to the standard complaints process. Introducing the two new ‘streams’ of complaints about outages is impractical and complex for customer service representatives and complaints-handling teams who are already operating in the pressurised environment of a major or significant outage. The new definition also opens a wide margin for non-compliance in the case of a customer query being categorised incorrectly – for no real consumer benefit.

Further, the Standard ensures that *any* contact about an outage becomes a complaint, and therefore requires a separate procedure to be able to resolve and close. This will inevitably only lead to increases in call wait times as resources are spent on managing resource-intensive complaints processes – where most customers simply want to report an issue and receive acknowledgement that we are working on it.

Prioritisation of network outage complaints

The new requirement at 17A(b)(ii), that a CSP has in place and implements processes to prioritise network outage complaints, is extremely problematic. This requirement suggests that a network outage complaint be prioritised over the complaints of customers experiencing vulnerable circumstances (not related to an urgent complaint) or the complaints of customers who have experienced an egregious billing error, as some examples. We do not think that this is appropriate or realistic. In reality, the vast majority of network outage complaints will be resolved once the outage is resolved, and no earlier. This requirement may create a false expectation that a CSP can take actions to triage and resolve a customer’s outage faster, when in actual fact there is little that we can do until the service is restored. Naturally a CSP will be prioritising the rectification of the outage, but we do not see this requirement as being helpful or meaningful to customer outcomes.

Additionally, many CSPs will have different teams working on different cohorts of complaints or aspects of the outage, for example, communications, complaints handling, and customer service may all be handled separately, in addition to the technical teams who are working on resolving the cause of the outage. Therefore it is not practical to have a requirement that we broadly prioritise network outage complaints, when in practise, different functions of a CSP will have different priorities. Further, any requirement that we must publicise our methods for prioritising complaints, is similarly impractical and to no consumer benefit.

Scope and application of ‘urgent network outage complaint’

Aussie Broadband is concerned with the definition of an ‘urgent network outage complaint’. We see it as somewhat ambiguous and subjective, to both the CSP and the consumer raising the complaint. To meet the threshold of an urgent network outage complaint, the customer needs to have ‘expressed a need for urgent assistance’. We understand that the intention of this is likely to capture customers who have safety concerns; in practise the wording does not sufficiently limit it to only those customers. We envisage customers expressing the need for their services

to be restored 'urgently' if they are a small business, for example. In the eyes of the customer, the potential revenue lost from a number of hours without a payment terminal may constitute needing 'urgent assistance'. Therefore a CSP should not be determining what we deem as 'urgent' on a case-by-case basis, rather this should be limited to health and safety concerns, or a situation of immediate danger, in the definition.

Further, the Standard now requires that CSPs make all reasonable efforts to assist a customer with an urgent network outage complaint to stay connected to a service during the outage, including by considering alternative options. Aussie Broadband highlights that in the vast majority of outage scenarios there is no way to connect a customer to an alternative service to keep them connected, particularly not on a case-by-case basis, and particularly not within a short time frame. Some CSPs may have the capability to send out alternative options such as a back-up SIM card, but these are not timely options. We understand the intent to keep customers with urgent complaints connected, but are concerned that this is difficult or often impossible to do in reality.

Increased requirements to contact customers

We note that in a number of new requirements, CSPs are required to proactively contact customers, seek their confirmation on matters, or send them additional information or resources:

- **17B(2)** introduces an expectation that CSPs retroactively go back and confirm with customers that their service outage report was indeed a network outage complaint, if we can determine that within 30 minutes of receiving their report. This contact also requires a significant amount of information to be shared with the customer.
- **17D(3)(c)** requires that a CSP send another notification to a customer when the network outage complaint is resolved, alongside the existing requirements under the CCO Standard that we notify a customer of the rectification of the outage. These must somehow be sent "with, and at the same time" as each other.
- **17D(5)** also requires that a CSP seek confirmation from a customer who made an urgent network outage complaint that the default resolution was successful within 2 calendar days.


Considering that an outage for the purposes of this standard could be triggered by as few as 1000 services in operation being impacted, customer contact centres may be inundated with potentially hundreds - and up to many thousands - of service outage reports, which must then be treated as network outage complaints. In the early moments of an outage it may take some time for a provider to assess the scale and severity, meaning that a great many customers may raise service outage reports before we can quantify that the event is a significant local or major outage. In this scenario, front-line staff would then have to retroactively contact all of the customers who raised a service outage report (potentially hundreds) to escalate those to network outage complaints under 17B(2) above. Depending on the scale of the outage, the requirement to contact under 17D(5) may also require significant resourcing. This is a huge administrative burden on CSPs and will reduce the availability of staff in our contact centres—leading to longer call wait times and a poorer customer experience.

We also raise that 17D(3)(c) may be difficult to operationalise as communications related to complaints may require different systems, triggers and personnel to deliver customer communications required under the CCO Standard, and thus may not be able to be delivered exactly "with, and at the same time" as each other.

Conclusion

We acknowledge the intent of the amended Standard to enhance consumer protections and options for resolution in the case of outages. Our concern, however, is that the method of granting these protections in the drafted instrument is not balancing the burden and difficulty for CSPs and frontline staff, with the intended consumer benefit. We suggest that the different pathways for complaints be simplified and refocussed on what a consumer wants – a promptly restored service and an avenue to discuss further options if they have been impacted.

Warm regards,


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