How companies report the quality of their customer service

A Plain English summary of our consultation.

Customer service information.

We'd like your views.

Ofcom is the independent watchdog for everything from television and radio broadcasting to mobile and fixed-line phone services.

One of our many roles is to encourage healthy competition, so that phone and internet companies will give us all a wide choice, high quality and good value.

That healthy competition works best when, as customers, we're fully in the know. If we're given good information that we can all understand, we're more likely to shop around, make good choices and be willing to switch to better deals.

Getting the information you need

Customers choose a particular phone or internet service for a variety of reasons.

For most people, price is the single most important thing. Obviously, technical factors such as broadband speeds or mobile call quality are also important (and we'll be looking into those in a separate consultation). But in our research, a significant number of people told us they also care about the standard of customer service they'll receive.

We call this 'quality of customer service' information ('QoS'), and it includes everything from how quickly a company answers the phone, to how many complaints they receive, to how swiftly they move to put things right.

Where are we now?

In January 2005, Ofcom published what we call a 'Direction' – a notice requiring action by certain companies who provide fixed-line phone services. We told them that we now required them to gather and publish up-to-date facts and stats on the quality of their customer service.

These companies got together as an industry and created www.topcomm.org.uk This website publishes the data we require – and also highlights anyone failing to provide it.

Two years after the website first appeared, we feel the time is now right to take stock. In this consultation, we want to hear your views. For example, should we be asking for this information at all? If so, how can we make sure it's as useful, accurate and high-profile as possible?

Our consultation: some of the main questions

1. Does the Ofcom 'Direction' need keeping, extending – or scrapping?

The Direction has been in place for two and half years now. Is it still relevant, do we still need it and, if so, could it work better for ordinary customers?

The companies that provide their service data have to organise it themselves, and foot the bill. As things stand, their investment doesn't reach a large audience. Some might argue it's an expensive burden – and one that can fall on small companies, not just the major players.

However, this information may help ordinary customers make better choices. It's also data that customers probably wouldn't see if Ofcom didn't order it to be published. If we keep the Direction, there may also be ways to make it more effective. For example we could:

- require other services – not just the fixed-line phone companies – to publish their QoS data as well;

- change the entry point where companies have to start providing information;

- look again at what type of information is most useful to ordinary customers;

- find better systems to check whether that information is true and accurate; and

- look at new ways to make sure the information reaches more people.

If we find that there is still a role for the Direction, we'd also value your views on other questions this might raise.

2. What kind of information should we publish?

What exactly do customers need to know? Should Ofcom let the industry decide on the scope of information it collects, or should we revise the Direction to lay down a fixed set of requirements?

In this consultation, we're looking at the information we expect companies to provide now, and whether we should remove, keep or alter those requirements.

This might focus on the following service issues:

- how long it takes for a customer to receive a service;

- how many complaints a company receives;

- how long they take to resolve them;

- how many complaints are due to faults;

- how long they take to fix those faults;

- complaints about bills being wrong; and

- how long it takes to answer a customer's call.

3. How can we get information we can trust?

Information that is wrong can be worse than having no information at all.

For customers, it's crucial that the data they receive gives a full and truthful guide. For the companies that provide it, it's vital that everyone plays by the same set of rules, and customers can make fair, like-for-like comparisons.

At the moment, the industry polices itself when it comes to checking that everyone's information is accurate. There's a two-stage audit process: each company checks its own data first, and then hands it over for an independent auditor to inspect it.

We're asking whether it's right for the companies to design their own checking processes, or whether Ofcom should lay down rules for them to follow. We want to know if the two-stage audit is doing its job, and whether there are ways we could make the quality of information even better – for example, through more regular reporting, more frequent audits and personal site visits by the auditors.

The choice of those auditors is also up for debate. For example, should the companies appoint their own independent auditor, or should Ofcom be involved? Also, should every company's information be inspected by the same independent expert?

4. How should this data be published and publicised?

The 'Topcomm' website is the current home of information on the quality of customer services. However, few people know about it and this is reflected in its low hit-rates.

We are interested in your views on how we can make sure this information can get a higher profile, and benefit more people. Questions include:

- how often should the information be published?

- ..and in what format?

- how can we reach people who don't have internet access, and people with disabilities who need extra help?

- what's the best way to publicise the Topcomm scheme to customers, journalists and the industry at large?

- is 'Topcomm' a good name, or should we look at others?

Our consultation: how to take part

This is your opportunity to give us your views on publishing customer service information, whether it should continue and, if so, any changes you'd like to see for the future.

Please note that this booklet is only a very basic summary of the consultation. To see the full document, please visit: www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/qos08/ .

We will be holding the consultation for a period of 12 weeks.

If possible, please give us your views by using the online web form at: www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/qos08/howtorespond/form. . Please also complete a response cover sheet which you'll find at: www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/244504/.

Alternatively, you can fax or post your contribution, to:

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The closing date for responses is: **08 October 2008, at 5pm**.

To simplify the process, we do not usually acknowledge that we have received your response.

We think it is important that anyone interested in our consultation can see the views we receive. For this reason, we will post all responses on our website. We will treat your response as confidential only if you ask us to. We may have to publish even confidential responses for legal reasons.

Any general comments?

We also welcome any comments you may have on the way we have organised this consultation process. Please contact:

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A guide to the consultation timetable.

July 2008	The 12-week consultation (10 + 2 extra weeks, allowing for the holiday period)
Early 2009	Ofcom publishes another consultation
Summer 2009	Ofcom publishes its final statement