



Is it time to make the switch to "03"?

Neil Sherring, Chief Executive of Windsor Telecom plc, explains to BAPCO Journal readers why "03" numbers are becoming increasingly popular for non-emergency calls.

The popularity of 03 numbers is now on the agenda for many key public sector organisations.

Joining the likes of the BBC and Oxfam, the Metropolitan Police has recently adopted one of these 03 numbers to use as its non-emergency number, opting for an 030 number: 0300 123 1212.

030 numbers have an 0300 or 0303 prefix and are specifically for public sector bodies and not-for-profit services. In contrast, 033 prefix numbers are available for any business or organisation that wishes to use them.

Both 030 and 033 numbers are part of the new 03 UK-wide range introduced by telecommunications regulator, Ofcom, last year as "an alternative to chargeable 08 numbers". They were made available to "increase certainty, trust and confidence in the numbers that consumers call to public services, voluntary organisations and companies" (Ofcom 2007). Like 08 telephone numbers (0845, 0800 etc.), 03 numbers are "non-geographic" – meaning that they do not have traditional area codes and offer callers a single, national point of contact.

However, a crucial difference between 08 and 03 numbers is the cost to call them: 03 numbers cost the same to dial as standard landline 01/02 numbers – even from a mobile phone. This is an important distinction to make when, according to Ofcom's Communications Report 2008, 40 per cent of all calls made in the UK last year were from mobiles. Furthermore, 03 numbers are also included in the free minutes allocations and discount schemes offered by all major mobile and landline networks, which means that calls to 03 numbers are often free.

Revenue sharing (where the dialled organisation obtains a share of the call cost) is not possible with 03 numbers and this is a major reason why 03 numbers are not subject to the negative publicity that surrounds some 08 numbers (e.g. 0870).

The use of non-geographic telephone numbers is widespread in the public safety sector as they allow organisations to add functionality to their telephone systems without the need for additional on-site equipment. In fact, this may be the reason why around half of the police forces in the UK now use a non-geographic telephone number for non-emergency calls.

There are many call management solutions that are prevalent in the public safety sector:

Systems that offer caller options allow organisations to automatically direct callers to different departments to ensure the call is answered by the correct person, straight away.

Call record functions enable organisations to record all or a percentage of their calls to use for future reference and/or for staff training.

Call divert features let organisations re-direct their calls to a landline or mobile number out-of-hours or in the event of an emergency.

One of the primary reasons that the Met required a non-emergency telephone number was to reduce the number of inappropriate calls they received to their 999 service, so that they could respond quickly and safely to genuine emergency calls. Commander Simon Bray from the Met recently stated: "In an average month we get about 200,000 emergency calls and about a quarter of those are calls which do not require an emergency response... It is now easier to contact the Met when it is not an emergency as you only need to know this one memorable number"

Along with the Met, there are many police forces now using 03 numbers, including services in Durham, Essex, Northumbria and Staffordshire.

The cost for organisations to set up and run 03 numbers varies, although telecoms suppliers are likely to charge a one-off connection fee, a monthly, quarterly, or annual service charge and/or a pence-per-minute (ppm) charge for the incoming calls (e.g. 0.25 ppm).

For organisations that already possess an 08 number, there is the option of an 03 equivalent number.

For example, if a police force has 0870 321 3211, it can exchange that number for 0370 321 3211.

Whilst this is a viable option, it is not yet clear whether 03 numbers will in the future, become compulsory for public sector organisations so that there is clarity for all callers to the sector. Should this be the case organisations that opted for an 03 equivalent number now would have to switch again and tolerate the costs and public confusion associated with another change. For this very reason, 0300 numbers appear to be the more popular option.

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