

Communications

Update

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Stations Sloppy on Complaints

A survey of commercial television stations around Australia has revealed a wide range of responses to new legislation which requires stations themselves, rather than the broadcasting regulator, to deal with complaints from viewers.

Only two of the stations surveyed had prepared a complaints brochure for use by the public; about one third had a guide for their own staff on handling complaints. Most stations believed complaints were important. One station said, 'If they're not complaining, they're not watching'. Another said that if the audience were quiet all the time, the station would be guilty of being too safe and not 'pushing the boundaries'. A few mentioned that most people contacting them did so to complain, while the satisfied viewers, who they believe to be the majority, rarely make contact. One station said complainants were often 'loonies'.

Stations tend to be passive recipients of complaints and there was little evidence of procedures on the part of stations to inform viewers about how to complain. Stations nevertheless rely to a significant extent on feedback from viewers, particularly phonecalls, as a kind of informal market research.

The backdrop to the survey of stations was that Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS) is currently calling for comment on its draft codes of practice for television licensees, required as part of the new emphasis on self-regulation under the Broadcasting Services Act. The draft code on complaints handling is summarised on page 3.

A consortium of unions and other organisations representing the interests of viewers (adults and children), performers, producers, writers and composers has made submissions to FACTS drawing attention to perceived problems with its draft codes. Among the areas the submissions have particularly highlighted is complaints handling by licensees.

Points made in the submissions included:

- Stating that licensees will 'make every reasonable effort to resolve complaints about code matters' is insufficient. Specific details should be provided about what steps they will take. For example, inaccuracies in news and current affairs could be remedied by on-air corrections.
- It is 'totally inadequate' that there is no independent complaints handling mechanism and that the complainants' final option is to refer complaints to

Continued on page 2 ...

IN THIS ISSUE

PBAA in Turmoil



People and their
Phones



Protecting
Journalists and
Whistleblowers





... Continued from page 1

a body (FACTS) which represents the interests of licensees.

- The code needs to specify how the licensees will collate complaints, and collated complaints should be sent not to FACTS but to the Australian Broadcasting Authority.
- Complaints data collected should include all program issues, not just those covered by codes, because complaints information is an important barometer of public opinion.

The groups pointed out that the ABA's predecessor provided an 008 number for complaints, while FACTS draft code requires complaints to be in writing. It is clear that the great majority of feedback received by stations (general comment and criticism) comes by phone. The submitters argued that non-written complaints, i.e. complaints made by telephone, should also be treated as formal complaints. Few people other than organised lobby groups or individuals with a serious grievance will take the time to write. While the majority of phone contact may concern minor matters, some phone calls at least may be classed as serious complaints.

The survey picked up this point and was divided into questions about written and oral complaints in an attempt to identify whether licensees currently tend to handle them differently.

Informal Responses

The survey showed a considerable degree of confusion among the stations themselves in their response to complaints. While it is true that the FACTS codes have not yet been ratified or approved by the ABA, many stations appear to be handling complaints informally, rather than following established systems or procedures. About half of the stations were prepared to review their response to a complainant if necessary. Others thought it appropriate to refer the complainant directly to a regulator, and most stations nominated the ABA. A

few mentioned FACTS and the Advertising Standards Council (ASC) as being the appropriate body.

In general, larger city stations and the major networks were more aware of their formal responsibilities than were smaller regional stations. The regional stations nevertheless appeared to handle complaints quite effectively from the point of view of their audience, and also - not unexpectedly - seemed to have a closer relationship with that audience.

The larger stations tend to have specific staff designated to handle complaints and briefed about their responsibilities. With their considerable resources, the networks are able to refer phone complaints to the appropriate programming department or a public relations section, while at many smaller stations they are dealt with by a receptionist who may not be aware of the station's obligations with regard to complaints.

In Sydney, the Seven Network uses a computer database to log all complaints (phoned and written). Nine also logs complaints on a daily basis which are referred to appropriate departments, and consolidates these into a weekly log for senior management. They are taken into account in future programming. At Nine, the person contacted had a detailed knowledge of all programs and of government requirements, as well as existing studies and background papers on audience complaints and self-regulation.

Confusion On Ads

The number of advertisements screened is a major cause of complaints, and it is up to the stations to police their own performance in meeting current ABA requirements. Sydney's Nine said it refers complainants to these requirements, as well as checking that the station is not exceeding the current limit. Correctly, Nine refers complaints about the **nature** of ads to the ASC - though on occasion it refers them to the advertiser.

The Perth station TVW 7 appears to be extremely well organised. They have a special complaints form to fill out, with an identifying number for

the ad concerned. If the advertisement is 'within the guidelines' and there is no appropriate action that the station can take, they refer the complainant to the ASC. If the volume of complaints about a specific ad is very high, they might simply remove it from their schedule.

Not everyone knew how to respond to complaints about ads, however. The range of responses was very wide, and included:

- Some regional stations said they would handle complaints about local ads themselves.
- About one third of stations including Sydney's Channel 10 did not mention any point of referral outside their own sales department.
- Two stations advised referral to the ABA, one to the advertising agency, and four to the advertiser.
- The rest were almost equally divided between those who said they would refer complainants to FACTS, and those who would refer to the ASC.

Methodology and Sample

The survey was commissioned by the Communications Law Centre and conducted during February, March and April this year. Stations were contacted by phone during working hours by a researcher who identified herself as a University of NSW student undertaking a research project on how stations handled complaints. She asked if they would respond verbally to a short questionnaire, taking approximately ten minutes to complete.

Some stations were eliminated because they provided no information, or the relevant person was not available, or a station was part of an aggregated group where another member responded. In all, 34 usable questionnaires were completed. Sixteen respondent stations were in State capitals; the remainder (18) were regional stations.

The survey does not claim to be definitive and the results should be regarded as indicative rather than conclusive. □