



Caller ID: hidden identity no more?

An AUSTEL report on caller identification is expected early next year. It will raise important issues such as privacy, informed choice and public awareness.

Sue Ferguson discusses the implications.

Caller ID (or Calling Number Display) is the telephone service which provides the called party (receiver) with the telephone number of the calling party (sender). The number is displayed on a special display unit which is attached to the telephone line or an in-built display on telephones.

The delivery of Caller ID information has implications for both senders and receivers. Some of the many issues associated with Caller ID include:

- privacy considerations associated with 'giving away' personal information such as a telephone number;
- the special needs of silent line customers;
- the basis on which the service is deployed (opt-in or opt-out);
- the need for guidelines regarding the use of Caller ID information obtained by businesses and organisations;
- the need to ensure that the public is informed and able to make a considered choice regarding the use of telecommunications services;
- blocking and sending options that are consistent across all telecommunications networks;
- charges for receiving Caller ID; and
- international standards.

Opt-in and opt-out refer to the default positions available for Caller ID, where opt-in provides the customer with automatic number blocking and a choice as to whether to send their number on either a per-call or permanent basis. Conversely, opt-out provides that the customer's number

is automatically sent, unless they elect to have either their line blocked or choose to block their number on a per-call basis.

In *CU 104* (October 1994), it was reported that a trial of the Caller ID service in Wauchope, NSW, had been deemed a success by Telstra (then Telecom), but that privacy issues arising from the technology were still a concern to consumer representatives. While positive aspects of the service to receivers of Caller ID, such as call screening and the consequent reduction in the number of harassing calls, are obvious, there are also negative issues associated with Caller ID. These include the unwanted dissemination of personal information and the potential abuse of that information through data matching, profiling, direct marketing, etc.

Following the Wauchope trial, a number of consumer organisations (including the Communications Law Centre), called for the cautious introduction of Caller ID, with particular concern targeted at portions of the community with difficulty understanding the uses and potential implications of the service.

Concern was also raised at the significant lack of awareness among Wauchope businesses of a Code of Practice developed to ensure information obtained from Caller ID would not be misused.

In September 1994, the Minister for Communications and the Arts, Michael Lee, requested that AUSTEL establish a Privacy Advisory Committee (PAC) to give priority attention to issues including Caller ID.

A Caller ID Working Group was established with representatives from AUSTEL, the Privacy Commissioner's

Office, Telstra, Optus, Vodafone and a consumer representative.

The working group is finalising its report to the Minister on the implementation of Caller ID in Australia. Guidelines addressing the following issues are being developed:

- how the service should be implemented;
- how consumers will be enabled to make an informed choice through a comprehensive public education campaign; and
- the protection of Caller ID information that might be collected by businesses and organisations.

Debate over the introduction of Caller ID has revolved around the optimum basis for introducing the service. A carrier's or service provider's need to maximise the pool of participants in Caller ID must be weighed against the potentially serious matter of the sender inadvertently giving away personal information. But ensuring comprehensive awareness of the service's potential benefits and pitfalls is not easy.

From a consumer perspective, the best way to retain privacy and control over the sending of Caller ID is to ensure that all consumers can make an informed choice about sending their numbers on Caller ID - an opt-in environment. However, from a receiver's point of view, this is not satisfactory, because inertia in the general population is likely to result in few choosing to send their number. How to balance these conflicting needs has been the biggest challenge of the working group.

It is anticipated that the Caller ID report will be publicly available early in 1996. □