



Codes Group seeks public comment

Sue Ferguson reports on the progress of the Consumer Codes Working Group

The post-July 1997 telecommunications regulatory regime is designed to introduce a significant degree of industry self-regulation, notably through the development and implementation of codes of practice. The draft telecommunications legislation provides that the industry may initiate a code or, where necessary, the Australian Communications Authority may direct the industry to develop a code.

The codes of practice regime will allow the telecommunications industry to establish its own governing rules and to be responsible for the administration and enforcement of these rules.

The draft telecommunications legislation suggests that codes of practice might include, amongst other things:

- customer information relating to the price, terms and conditions of goods or services of offer;
- internal handling and reporting of customer complaints;
- privacy;
- the 'churning' of customers;
- disconnection of customers;
- quality of standard telephone services; and
- the accuracy, timeliness and comprehensibility of bills.

In order to ensure that the codes of practice regime is credible to the public at large, it is essential that the industry commits to participation by the public at *all* stages of the self-regulatory scheme. To date, the involvement of consumer and regulatory representatives in the work of the Consumer Codes Working Group has contributed much towards the achievement of mutually satisfactory outcomes.

Consumer Codes Working Group

In September 1996, the Consumer Codes Working Group (CCWG) met for the first time to commence the process of implementing the government's self-regulatory policies in the consumer area. The CCWG is an informal, but representative, group of organisations brought together under the auspices of the Network Interworking Industry Forum (NIIF) and includes industry, regulatory and consumer representatives. It is anticipated that the CCWG will continue in an appropriate form in the post-July environment under the proposed Communications Industry Forum (CIF) structure and will oversee the management of the codes of practice system.

The CCWG has met six times, during which it has worked towards the production of a document aimed at serving as a practical guide for those involved in the

development of consumer codes of practice. The document provides guiding principles intended to apply uniformly to all code development activities and to be the reference points against such activities may be tested. These guiding principles are viewed as fundamental to the development of codes and include issues of consumer benefit, consistency, responsiveness, and competitive neutrality.

The operational principles deal with the initiation of a code, input into code development, characteristics of codes, and code registration, administration, compliance and enforcement. The code of practice template provides guidance in the development and implementation of codes in accordance with structural recommendations made by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. Finally, the CCWG's package of information includes a framework for identifying a need for a code and prioritising code development.

In order to ensure that as wide a range of consumer and industry participants as possible have the opportunity to review and comment on the output of the CCWG, the CCWG is in the process of disseminating its set of guidelines and seeking comments from interested parties.

A copy of the CCWG's *Guidelines for the Development of Self-regulatory Telecommunications Industry Codes of Practice* is available from the CCWG Secretariat or from the Communications Law Centre (contact details below). Comments are requested by **Friday 11 April 1997**. Written comments may be sent directly to the CCWG Secretariat or to any member of the CCWG. □

The Consumer Codes Working Group Secretariat

C/- Deirdre O'Donnell
Regulatory Affairs
Optus Communications
15/367 Collins Street
MELBOURNE VIC 3000
Tel: 03 9233 1871
Fax: 03 9233 4922
e-mail: deirdre_odonnell@yes.optus.com.au
Sue Ferguson

Communications Law Centre

University of NSW 2052
Tel: 02 9663 0551
Fax: 02 9662 6839
e-mail: comslaw@ozemail.com.au