# Getting the numbers right

**Executive Summary**

*Choosing the right type of telephone number is an important decision as it helps to form an impression of your business from the start.*

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## First Impressions Count

When choosing a telephone number for your business, first impressions count and when calling your business, the type of telephone number you have may make a difference about whether you receive a call at all.

With scandals innocently involving national treasures such as Ant and Dec in "premium number" mischarging, mobile operators charging to "freephone numbers" wide variations in tariffs and much confusion over 08 numbers customer are, rightly, wary about telephone numbers and which to trust. No business wants to put up barriers to potential customers making that first telephone call to them so what type of telephone number should a business choose?

*"Using a mobile number sends a signal that you are a one man band."*

For a sole trader, out on the road, people will understand that you are mobile all day and that is the nature of your business. This may be ok for certain types of business but will not necessarily give the best impression for a business with ambitions to grow beyond one man and a mobile. People also worry that mobile numbers could just be a pay as you go mobile that disappears as quickly as the trader does!

Originally 070 personal numbers were designed to give people a number that followed them around, but smart call diverts and the ability to port numbers more easily has really put these numbers in decline. The added uncertainty over cost (up to £1.50 per minute and a call set-up fee) has led to mistrust and confusion. 0800, 0808 and 0500 numbers are free from BT landlines (many mobile operators charge) but you, as the call recipient, will be billed the call costs. For a mass consumer oriented business this might be attractive to end users but may prove expensive to you if you have a low conversion rate of calls to sales. In a B2B environment most businesses accept and expect that they will bear the cost of making a call to a supplier so having a "freephone number" is seen as a necessary cost to the business.

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Mobile network operators that charge for 08 numbers are forced to play a message that" calls to this number may be charged". Often no tariff which may be up to 40p per minute is stated. This may put some people off defeating the point of paying for a "user friendly" number. At the time of writing Ofcom wants to make all calls to "freephone numbers" actually free and is consulting on the issue. Until then the practice of some operators charging for calls to "freephone numbers" has somewhat eroded their intended purpose.

08 business rate numbers were designed to allow businesses to have a single national number but within them there are a range of options from 0843 and 0844 numbers to the more well-known 0845 and 0870 numbers. The charges to these calls vary widely The newer 0871/2/3 services have additional elements of regulation in them but whether that will increase consumer confidence or cause more confusion will wait to be seen.

As of June 2014, it was contrary to Ofcom regulations to provide an 0845, 0870 or similar number for customer service and complaints lines. The relevant law was passed in December 2013 as part of 'The Consumer Contracts Regulations 2013' and came into force on 13 June 2014. The driving force behind these changes is simple: "Customers should not be made to pay extra for attempting to rectify problems which are not their fault".

It is important to note that these changes only apply to customer service and complaint lines. Companies will still be able to use 0845 numbers for advanced support services such as technical advice, so long as the charges are clearly advertised. Services specifically paid for through the cost of the call (for example horoscopes and television voting) and sales lines are also unaffected.

Organisations using 0845 or similar numbers for customer service and complaint lines, should switch to either a geographical number or, if they still require the technological benefits of an 0845 number, an 03 non-geographic number (see below).

The 09 premium rate numbers are now well known, notorious even. These are the numbers typically used for telephone voting and have variable tariffs and revenue splits for operators. The problem for businesses using them is that the widespread

reporting of premium rate number scams make people wary of dialling them. Asking someone to call you back on a 09 number may not elicit many responses especially as many companies bar calls to such numbers on their telephone systems.

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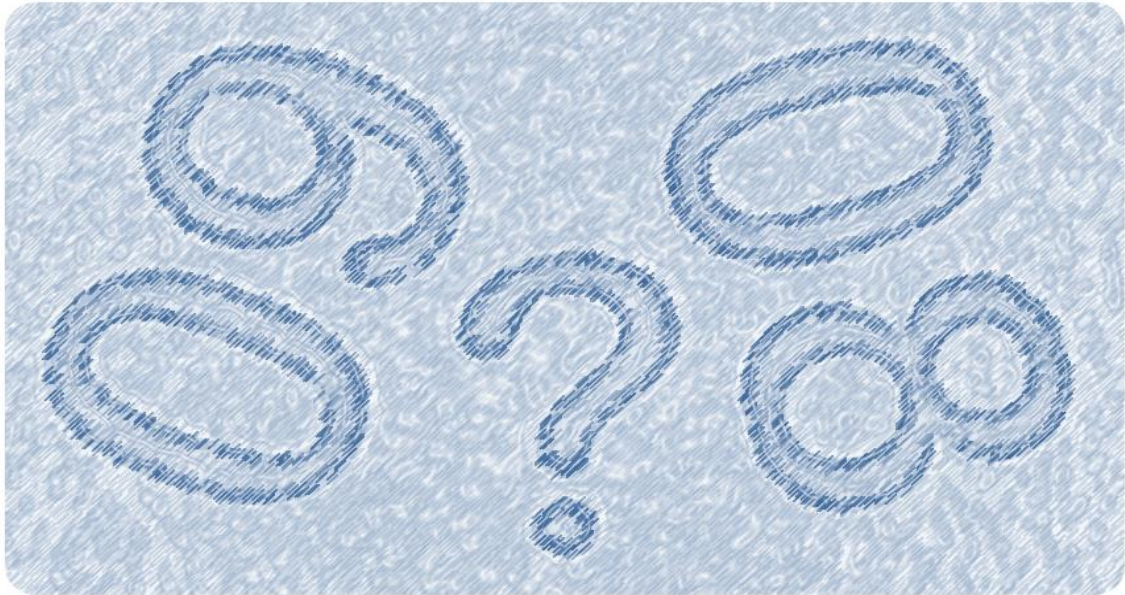
## Geographic & Non Geographic Numbers

03 numbers are non geographic numbers, they are not tied to any specific location but calls cost the same to the caller as geographic numbers. Ofcom regulations forbid operators for charging any more for these than national numbers and must be included in inclusive packages the same way as geographic numbers. The regulation makes them consumer friendly but public awareness of them is poor. No one knows where "03" area code is so they are not bothered about location or may confuse them with premium rate numbers.

A geographic number gives the impression that you at least have a building with a telephone line attached to it. These are numbers beginning 01 or 02 and due to the way historically that telephone network was built the first 3 to 5 digits are an "area code" that belong to a specific town or city.

They are traditionally associated with landlines tied to a local exchange. The problem traditionally with using landlines for business if you are a one man band was that the number has to always be manned, forwarded elsewhere using smart divert services or hope that a caller would leave an audible answerphone message.

Geographic numbers tie a business down to an area which may be exactly what you want to demonstrate that you are a local business serving a local area. For a national business having a number in a major metropolis like London or Birmingham is what people expect. The mini backlash against 0845 numbers has led to people wanting to hunt down the "real" geographic number that is behind the number.  The benefit that callers see for geographic numbers is that they are normally bundled in with call packages so removing the fear of a large cost of dialling anonymous 0845 number. Geographic numbers may be old fashioned but maybe at the moment old fashioned to some people is more trustworthy.

Small businesses can have the best of both worlds with geographic numbers and the flexibility of being able to route calls to wherever they can be answered. Even the smallest of businesses can have multiple geographic numbers even if they don't have a physical presence in that area.

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On Spitfire's hosted cloud based telephone system, SIP Communicator™ customers can choose multiple geographic number from any UK area and have them all route into their hosted telephone system which can be answered from anywhere with internet connectivity or diverted to a another number. It enables businesses to set up a "virtual office" in an area long before they have to think about opening an office there allowing them to build a customer base or experiment with local sales campaigns first.

In summary choosing the right type of telephone number is an important decision as it helps to form an impression of your business straight away!

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## About the author



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