CONSUMER AFFAIRS

Alton Towers and Legoland among companies caught out using premium-rate numbers

Businesses are flouting regulations by continuing to charge existing customers high rates to get in touch

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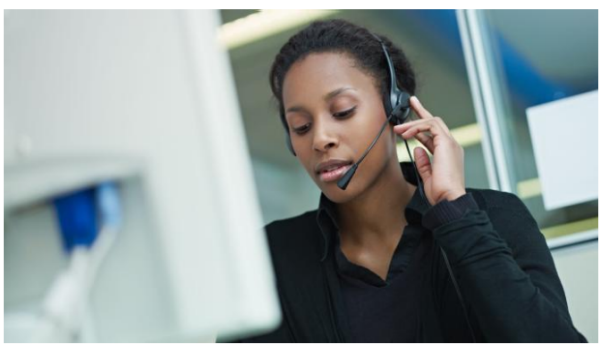

Customers could be charged up to 78p a minute to make calls to product support helplines
ALAMY

Big-name companies such as Alton Towers and Legoland risk breaching telecoms regulations by using premium-rate numbers for customer service calls.

A *Times* Money investigation has found that several companies ask customers to call expensive 0844, 0845 or 0871 numbers for technical, service and product support.

Regulations, which came into force in June 2014, banned companies from providing premium-rate numbers to existing customers. Where an existing customer does call a higher-rate phone line for after-sales support of a product or service, the company must pay the difference between the basic and higher-rate call charge.

While many companies have complied with the regulations, others have failed to do so.

The cost of a premium number is made up of two parts: an access charge going to your phone company, and a service charge set by the organisation you are calling. Calls to 084 numbers can cost up to 7p a minute, plus the access fee charged by a caller's phone company. Calls to 0871 numbers cost up to 13p a minute, plus the access fee.

If these call charges sound steep, they are dwarfed by the access fees. In most cases this is 55p a minute, although EE charges up to 65p a minute, meaning that a call to an 0871 number could cost 78p a minute.

David Hickson of the lobby group Fair Telecoms Campaign says: "There can be no justification for breaking the law by providing 084 or 087 numbers for calls from customers."

"All use of 084 and 087 numbers is greedy and foolish. Earning no more than 13p a minute from a call that costs up to 78p a minute is simply bad business and unfair to customers."

Anyone staying overnight at a Legoland or Alton Towers hotel would be charged 13p a minute, plus the access fee, if they called the post-booking 0871 helpline of the companies rather than email their query. A Legoland spokesman says: "The premium-rate number appeared in error and has been removed. All guests have access to a local phone number on their booking confirmations. We apologise for any confusion this may have caused."

Alton Towers removed its 0871 number after *The Times* contacted the company.

Times Money also found issues with transport companies. DFDS, which runs ferries from England to France and the Netherlands, invites existing customers needing assistance to call an 0871 number. After our intervention it added an 03 number for customers that have a booking.

NorthLink Ferries runs services from mainland Scotland to Shetland and Orkney, and uses an 0845 number for bookings and reservations from UK phone numbers, or an 01 (basic-rate) number for calls from international and UK mobiles. The company told us that landline customers can also call the 01 number, but this advice is not displayed on the website.

Eurotunnel customers need to call an 0844 number that costs up to 7p a minute, plus an access fee, if they want to inquire about a Flexiplus reservation.

A company spokesman says: "Eurotunnel has a variety of options for customers for pre-booking inquiries, reservations and post- reservation queries. All are compliant with regulations and the cost of each option is clearly marked on our website. Most customers book and manage their reservations via our website."

Television channels are also among those appearing not to abide by the regulations. The sister channels Ideal World and Create and Craft provide 0871 numbers for customers wishing to track orders, change their address details or check refunds. The numbers feature five times on the contact pages of the channels' websites, and cost 13p a minute to call, plus the access charge. Each channel also lists an 0330 number, which is charged at the basic rate, for problems with products or to cancel orders.

Jo Jenkins, the head of customer services, says: "We have decided to make the 0330 number even more prominent, going above the requirements to offer further guidance to our customers."

Racing TV charges up to 10p a minute for calls to its 0844 technical support line, including for problems with live streaming of horse races for subscribers. It maintains that it complies with the regulations. A spokesman says: "All communications we send active customers have been updated to reflect the 03 customer service line for technical queries and we've updated the help centre on our website to reflect this as well."

Martyn James of Resolver, a complaints resolution service, says: "Despite years of warnings from the government and regulator about higher-rate telephone helplines, the fact that some businesses are still charging people excessive fees for calls, without a clear and cheap alternative, is frankly outrageous.

"There's a significant difference between calling a business for information and calling them because you need help with their own products and services. People should not pay a premium for dealing with a problem."

How to avoid the charges

Customers who have already paid for a service or product should not have to face a bill of up to £11.70 (78p a minute) for a 15-minute call relating to their purchase. Unfortunately, this can be the case if the company being contacted is breaching the Consumer Contracts (Information, Cancellation and Additional Charges) Regulations 2013. Customers should look online for a cheaper geographical phone number, perhaps one for the head office or international inquiries. Another option is to visit websites such as saynoto0870.com and weq4u.co.uk for apps and services offering cheap alternatives to higher-rate numbers.

https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/money/alton-towers-and-legoland-among-companies-caught-out-using-premium-rate-numbers-qmzjfgz6t

See also Consumer Contracts Regulations