The peak national consumer advocacy organisation for communications

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TelSoc Presentation

Carol Bennett, Chief Executive Officer, ACCAN

Good afternoon everyone.

Thank you to Jim, Michelle and the board of TelSoc for the invitation to speak today, and thank you to all of you for taking the time to participate.

I would also like to **acknowledge the traditional owners** of the lands on which we join this conversation today. I pay my respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging.

I lead the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network - ACCAN - the **national peak body** representing Australian communications consumers. Our members include community legal centres, regional organisations, small business representatives, consumer advocates and accessibility campaigners.

Collectively, **our members** reflect Australian consumers in all their diversity, all of whom rely on communications services every day, often in ways that are taken for granted - until something goes wrong.

2025 was an unusually intense year to be the voice for consumers of communications and digital services.

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There were genuine **advances** in technology, infrastructure and policy, some realised, and some which we are on the verge of realising.

But at the same time, 2025 was **marked by a series of failures** that shattered public trust and exposed long-standing weaknesses in delivering the reliable, high quality services that consumers pay for and expect.

If we want to tackle failures and build further on successes then we must be clear-eyed about the **scale of the challenges** facing this sector.

So today, I want to first **acknowledge some of the underlying issues driving ACCAN's priorities**. There are **many areas** Australians and ACCAN members want to see us advocate for, and I will outline the **three central themes** that we believe now define the operating environment for communications in Australia.

These themes are: **Accountability & Honesty** - **Delivery** – and **Competition**

And I will take the time to suggest a path forward — one that is grounded in accountability, delivery and competition

Accountability and Honesty

My first theme is accountability - and at the heart of accountability is honesty. Unconscionable sales practices, data breaches and outages must be treated as matters of the highest priority - or in the case of poor practice, should not occur at all.

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When failures do happen, consumers are entitled to clear, timely and truthful information: what has gone wrong with their connection, what is being done to fix it, what steps they should take to protect their access and safety, and when the issue will be resolved.

Too often, that standard is not met. As recently as last month, an Apple/Telstra fault prevented some users from connecting to Triple Zero and regular calls until an emergency patch was issued. Yet there was little direct public communication, despite the obvious safety implications. That silence is not accountability.

Last night, an Optus/Erikson outage affected 220K customers and as of 6pm 115k were still unsure when and how they might have restored connectivity. While Optus says it doesn't know what cause the issue or how to resolve it, they did at least issue a media statement.

It now seems that distrust underpins almost every conversation about communications.

For a long time, concerns raised by consumers and consumer advocates were easy to dismiss as anecdotal, or as the inevitable background noise of a complex sector. That is no longer the case, although it seems some within the industry still cling to the mantra that telco's are all doing a remarkably good job.

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This 'head in the sand' view of the Telco world clearly doesn't reflect the experience of consumers. This is troubling as unless industry acknowledges and understands there is a problem, it will do little to fix it.

Lets look at some of the facts that underline this accountability crisis:

Roy Morgan polling released last year found that **telecommunications is now the most distrusted sector in the Australian economy**. That is a striking result. It places telco higher than supermarkets, mining and resources, real estate, gambling and pharmaceuticals on this measure.

What's more, Optus - Australia's second largest telco - is now the **single most distrusted brand** in the country.

ACCAN's own research paints a similar picture. Our Consumer Sentiment Tracker, with polling conducted by Essential Media, found that even before the 2025 Triple Zero saga:

- 48% of consumers did not trust their phone or internet provider to work to keep costs low
- 43% do not trust their provider to act in their best interest
- Worryingly, 42% did not trust their provider to appropriately store their personal information, including data on device use and search history.

> Almost half of all consumers did not trust their provider to recommend the plan that best suits their needs, rather than the most expensive option.

This distrust is warranted - you don't get to this level of distrust without a track record of failures. It is far more than a reputational issue. Distrust doesn't just reflect frustration. It breeds suspicion. It changes how consumers interpret information, how they respond to incidents, how much they are willing to pay for goods and services. It cripples brand loyalty.

In all sectors, **distrust is destabilising**. And especially in an essential service sector like telco, distrust magnifies the impact of failures, accelerates switching as people value services less and willingness to spend has declined and it erodes the social licence that providers rely on to operate.

As Roy Morgan's CEO Michelle Levine put it in December last year that: **trust is now every telco's essential currency**.

Once lost, it cannot be rebuilt quickly or through messaging alone.

Restoring trust requires a fundamental change in the way businesses approach, consider and treat their customers. But first, there must be acknowledgment that there is a problem and that end users – consumers – are the priority.

Looking around the world to countries including Germany (Deutsche Telekom), US (Verizon and AT&T), Japan (NTT) and Switzerland (Swisscom), they have four defining features:

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network reliability

customer service

transparency and

security.

There are some good news stories – take Aussie Broadband, which is a well-regarded brand, but such examples are an oasis in a desert of telco distrust.

Simply disregarding the facts and consumer sentiment is a recipe for ongoing failures.

Similarly, shooting the messenger – in our case ACCAN - will not change the reality. Nor will it stop our advocacy for consumers.

It is because of this environment that accountability is needed through improved regulatory settings. The TCP Code is still on the desks of the ACMA Authority members, awaiting a final decision. ACCAN and the Fair Call Coalition – an alliance of 23 consumer organisations recognise that late-hour redrafting of the Code has brought some improvements – but it is too little, too late. These changes to the Code's wording do not reflect strengthened consumer protections.

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The updated Code still fails to provide appropriate community safeguards. The Fair Call Coalition is deeply concerned that the fundamental problems identified by ACMA, the Fair Call Coalition itself, the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) and the ACCC have not been resolved.

The proposed updated Code does not adequately address ongoing and critical problems, nor does it offer meaningful avenues for consumer remedies when things go wrong.

Given these ongoing deficiencies, the Fair Call Coalition is calling on ACMA to develop binding industry standards in the following critical areas:

Sales practices - to eliminate sales incentives schemes that have exploited consumers through misleading and high-pressure sales.

Credit assessments – to prevent unaffordable plans being pushed onto people who cannot sustain them.

Disconnection and service-limiting actions - to protect consumers from being unfairly cut off from essential communications services.

Mobile coverage information and remedies - to ensure people are told the truth about coverage and have clear rights when services do not perform as promised.

Direct regulation is the only way forward. The sector has had years to listen to consumers and ACMA about the improvements that must be made in the Code, yet have repeatedly failed to do so.

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Ultimately without clear, enforceable rules and meaningful consequences when providers fail, the gap between industry claims and consumer experience will persist - and confidence in this essential sector will continue to erode. Accountability, in this instance, necessitates better conduct, and now better rules are needed.

Similarly in the digital platforms space, ACCAN has consistently argued that Australia needs **fit-for-purpose digital platforms regulation**, including an **independent external dispute resolution process** – which is supported by 82% of consumers in our national Consumer Sentiment Tracker. This in our view is best achieved through an expansion of the role and responsibilities of the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman.

Delivery

My second theme is delivery. Central to delivery is knowing that there are clear frameworks and processes, and a high priority is placed on ensuring that network failures are addressed quickly, especially when it concerns safety such as Triple Zero – something we learnt all too well in the Triple Zero saga of late 2025.

Across the sector, the fastest-growing driver of distrust is **reliability**.

For many years, consumers were most concerned by privacy breaches, shonky sales and tricky pricing practices. Those issues remain vital. But the new driver of distrust is providers not delivering on the basics – the basics consumers expect, that they have paid for and that cannot be traded off.

Telecommunications is now recognised by the community, government and - broadly - the industry as an **essential service**.

Yet through 2025, repeated outages, network instability, and - most critically - failure of **Triple Zero emergency communications** rained blow after blow to community confidence.

Australians expect that communications services will work when they are needed most: during emergencies, during natural disasters, during moments of crisis. When they do not, the consequences are life-threatening.

This issue is particularly acute in **regional, rural and remote Australia**. When coverage is patchy, when networks fail, or when emergency calling does not work as expected, there is no fallback option - no one around, and no neighbour to call.

That is why ACCAN is calling on the government to establish wholesale and retail mobile network performance standards to improve consumers' access to reliable mobile services, including emergency services, in keeping with other essential service sectors such as energy.

We welcomed the steps taken last year following intense public and political scrutiny, including mandatory outage reporting, the establishment of a Triple Zero custodian, work on nationally consistent coverage maps, and a central register of devices that are not fully compatible with emergency calling.

These reforms matter. They improve transparency and accountability. But they do not yet go far enough.

While we appreciate that mobile service provision exists in an ecosystem of manufacturers, software developers and hardware providers – each playing a role in reliability - we need to have service standards in place, and accompanied by:

> Mechanisms which ensure breaches of performance standards and benchmarks are enforceable through civil penalty provisions.
>
> A suite of directly enforceable protections, including direct compensation for breaches of performance standards, recognising the many financial and other costs of telecommunications service disruptions to business and consumers.

That telecommunications services are essential has been the great public realisation of late, despite the regulation and legislation not reflecting this.

Delivery is no longer optional or negotiable - and distrust is now at such lows that reliable services cannot be dependent on goodwill.

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A key driver of improved delivery can and should be spectrum coverage obligations.

Over the coming years, much of the spectrum currently in use is up for renewal. We are of the view – informed by experts - that the telecommunications **industry is getting a great deal under ACMA's current proposal.**

While ACMA announced in late 2025 that they were revising *up* the price telcos must pay for expiring spectrum licences, the new figure of $7.3 billion over the licence period still represents a 10% decline in fees compared to the previous period.

In other words - telcos are getting a discount on previous spectrum pricing.

ACCAN's position is simple:

Discounted spectrum licences must be paired with investment commitments that ensures public benefit and improved service delivery.

Spectrum is a public resource. It underpins mobile connectivity across the country. The license to provide mobile services inherently comes with an

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obligation to serve the public interest. Renewal decisions should not simply preserve existing market structures or deliver commercial outcomes. They should be used as a lever to improve:

coverage,

reliability,

and service quality - particularly in regional and remote areas.

This is not about imposing arbitrary obligations. It is about ensuring consumer interests are balanced with the benefits of reduced licence fees for telcos. It is about acknowledgement that there is a public service obligation on providers who are given market access to a finite public asset that enables them to operate profitable businesses.

Telcos benefit. The public benefits also.

Industry is being granted continued use of a public asset on favourable terms, and consumers get a guarantee that services and prices will improve. That includes improved reliability, stronger coverage obligations, and investment that reduces the risk of failure.

Spectrum policy is not just about profits, it cannot be divorced from consumer outcomes.

Last year also saw important developments in the use of new technologies to expand coverage.

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ACCAN welcomed the introduction of legislation to establish the **Universal Outdoor Mobile Obligation**, a reform that has the potential to dramatically improve access to baseline outdoor voice and SMS services across almost the entire continent. This is a generational shift in how universal service is understood, combining traditional infrastructure with direct-to-handset satellite technology.

We also saw significant announcements in the satellite broadband space, including the NBN's partnership with Amazon LEO that promises to transform connectivity for regional, rural and remote communities.

These developments are certainly promising. But technology alone does not guarantee better outcomes. New delivery models must be accompanied by:

clear consumer protections,

robust service standards,

and genuine consultation with affected communities.

A poor transition to emerging technologies, unclear responsibilities, or inadequate safeguards risk repeating the mistakes of the past.

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Competition

My third and final theme is competition. Most of you will be aware of a recent report by the OECD notes that Australians are paying high prices for mobile services compared to other countries, and consumers believe this to be the case. A recent ACCC report also found persistent price increases, with all three major telcos hiking their entry level post-paid plans around 5%-8% - well above CPI.

Many vulnerable groups struggle just to maintain access to connectivity essential to their daily lives. Cost is a barrier to access and undermines equity of access, while Australian telcos are seen to be making healthy profits. Telstra's EBITDA, sits at $8.6 billion, while Optus' is $2.2 billion.

Consumers don't believe this profitability is being passed on in investments or prices that provide them with reliable, quality and cost-effective services.

The time is right to reconsider **mobile network roaming**. Roaming and network sharing would enhance competition in the market, reduce prices in the regions and strengthen coverage, especially during disasters. It would be consistent with the direction other countries are heading.

The ACCC, last considered domestic roaming in 2016, and at the time, decided not to move on it. Back then, it thought competition could deliver the benefits without rules.

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Yet fast forward 10 years, and terrestrial mobile infrastructure investment has stagnated. By industry's own admission Luke Coleman said last year: 'we have reached the geographic and economic edge of where telcos are willing to invest in terrestrial mobile infrastructure. Now is the time to move to domestic roaming to promote effective retail competition for all Australians.

The economics of network investment, even by industry's own admission, don't stack up like they used to. 5G has not proved as lucrative as hoped, and fewer carriers are participating in programs like the Mobile Black Spot Program. With the UOMO policy concreting the public benefit of new technologies, we must assess the future of mobile networks – which remain the backbone of mobile telecommunications.

In our view, domestic mobile roaming would reduce market distorting incumbent advantages, and enhance competition on price, customer service and service quality.

A decade on we will be asking government to again consider mobile network roaming.

Digital Platforms

Communications policy can no longer stop at networks and carriers. Digital platforms now shape how Australians communicate, access information, conduct business, and seek help in moments of crisis.

Australia's regulation of digital platforms is world leading in some respects, but lags in others.

I think immediately of the social media ban for under 16 year olds, which Australia has pioneered, and other countries are now moving to emulate. Despite suffering a global first mover *disadvantage,* the restrictions on children's access to some online products have been, on the whole, successful, and are making a positive difference for many families around Australia.

Yet in other areas, international jurisdictions have led the way. Digital competition needs to be advanced as a priority by government: Australia is lagging behind Europe and the UK. In the Australian market, successive inquiries into the state of digital service markets have routinely found that they are dominated by a small number of players with substantial market power.

There are a multitude of benefits to be realised by unlocking competition in digital service markets – greater consumer choice, reduced prices and enhanced service innovation. To this end, there are a number of measures the government could adopt to strengthen the proposed Digital Competition Regime.

I have already talked about distrust in telecommunications pointing out that two of the 10 most distrusted brands in this county are telcos. But it can't be overlooked that four of the 10 most distrusted brands are **digital platforms** - X, Amazon, Temu and Meta.

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This is not simply about consumer rights in a transactional sense. It is also about **community safety**.

Despite the myriad of harms that occur on digital platforms - scams, impersonation, abuse, misinformation, or other systemic failures - consumers currently face fragmented and often ineffective pathways for redress. That gap undermines trust just as surely as network outages undermine trust in telco providers.

An accessible, credible dispute resolution framework is essential to restoring confidence in digital services and ensuring that safety is not left to internal processes alone.

The path forward – concluding thoughts

So in summarising these three key issues, I have one key message to leave with you today: the communications sector does not have a public relations or communications problem. It has a **fundamental trust problem, grounded in the lived experience of consumers**.

If we are to find a path forward to deliver the communications services that consumers deserve, it will take more than just spin and it will definitely take more than companies failing to acknowledge these issues and proclaiming themselves an outstanding success.

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Trust will not be rebuilt through advertising, branding or reassurance. It won't be rebuilt by attacking critics or consumer groups. It will be rebuilt slowly and deliberately through acknowledgement that there are problems and:

fewer failures,

enforceable reliability standards,

investment tied to public benefit,

transparency and accountability,

and regulation that reflects the essential nature of modern communications.

In short, it needs to deliver consumer experience that is consistent with the Industry claims of being a success story for Australia.

For ACCAN, that means continuing to push for:

mobile reliability and performance standards, particularly for regional safety;

binding investment and coverage commitments alongside spectrum renewal;

stronger, enforceable consumer safeguards;

and digital platforms regulation that includes independent dispute resolution.

These reforms should not be seen as harming or inhibiting the telco and digital industries. Rather, they will restore public confidence, and public confidence in

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this sector needs to be restored - given Australians rely on their connections every day.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak today. I look forward to continuing this discussion and playing our own role as consumer advocates in improving the standard of communications in Australia.

ENDS