

# Toll-Free Numbers and Consumers Experiences: An Exploratory Survey

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## *Abstract*

*This exploratory survey examines the experiences of consumers using toll free number during the following three phases (pre-usage, usage, post-usage). Data were collected from 240 respondents residing in and around the Emirates of Sharjah and Dubai. The results indicate that the sample find toll free numbers easy to operate and helpful. However, the respondents faced problems such as long waiting time and unable to speak to the right person. To improve the services of toll free numbers professionally trained staff should be made available round the clock to attend consumers' calls and organizations can prepare a list of frequently asked questions and orient the staff who attend toll free calls. It is further suggested that studies can be carried out separately on specific service industries or manufacturing organizations.*

**Keywords:** Toll – free numbers, Consumers, Phases, Frequency, Problems, Training.

## **Introduction**

Organizations continue to put in every possible effort for getting satisfied and loyal consumers to survive and grow. However, these efforts can work only when the consumers are satisfied every time with their purchases. Organizations wanting to secure the continued patronage of their consumers should evolve strategies for their consumers to voice their compliments, complaints, and suggestions. Such strategies may well include feedback surveys, or service provider / employee evaluation forms, toll- free numbers and customer service calls (Kelli Bodey, Debra Grace, 2006).

AT&T developed 1-800 numbers in 1967 as a convenient way for businesses to pay the tolls for their customers who contacted them (Gaebler.com).

Toll free numbers are an integral part of doing business today. They combine a powerful sales and marketing tool with added benefits over a local line. Small and large business alike use toll free numbers to appeal to a larger percentage of consumers, establish confidence with customers, and take advantage of features not offered on local lines (Brandi Cummings, 2006).

A toll free number motivates a potential customer to satisfy his curiosity of the product or service in a convenient and hassle free manner since he is not charged for making calls to the company. In addition, toll free numbers serve as a user friendly marketing tool (Mark Richardson, 2008). Consumer research shows that customers who search phone book listings, when faced with a choice of several similar businesses, are much more likely to call a business with a toll free number than a business with a long- distance number and in addition, toll free numbers boost consumer confidence. Consumers assume that business with toll- free numbers are larger and more stable than their competitors (Yahoo! Small Business). Toll- free numbers are also increasingly popular for personal use. For example, parents can obtain toll-free numbers to give to a young adult who is away at college (FCC Consumer Facts, 2008).

According to the US Census Bureau, every 31 seconds a limited- English speaker enters the US. But there is a silver lining. Typically, a pharmacist in a health system, clinic or community pharmacy setting initiates a three-way call over an 800- line via a dual hand set among the patient, pharmacist, and physician. An interpreter assists the pharmacist in explaining to patients how to take medications, the proper dosage and potential interaction (Anthony Vecchione, 2006).

Even for a small association, an 800 service can still be a good investment. According to Mark B. Bundick of the National Association of Rocketry, when considering an 800 service, the combination of staff size, services offered, and the number of members who will be calling will help you determine whether you can provide a better service with an 800 number than with other methods ( Gary Fetgatter, Susan Cheshire, Mark B. Bundick, 2007).

Due to liberalization and globalization of trade, commerce and services and developments in the field of information and communication technology, the need for faster, reliable and inexpensive means of communication such as the toll-free number may become a necessity for companies operating in different industries (Mark Richardson, 2008).

## **2. Literature Review**

A few studies have been undertaken to understand the experiences of consumers using toll-free numbers.

Businesses recognize effective handling of consumer communication as one way to maintain and enhance relationships with consumers. Previously, most communication between consumers and consumer product manufacturer was done by correspondence. More recently, 1- 800, toll- free numbers have been an increasingly popular way for consumers to deliver a complaint, seek information, or give business a compliment. Although toll- free services have grown rapidly, specific information about 1-800 calling experiences is scarce (Charles L.Martin, Denise T. Smart, 1994). They further add that published empirical research pertaining to consumer-to-business communication deals almost exclusively with writ

ten correspondence.

According to a new study of television advertising by Response Marketing Group, twenty-four percent of television commercials contain a toll-free number, 91% using the 800 prefix (Anonymous, 1998).

According to a study of magazine advertising by New Response Marketing Group, fifty-eight percent of magazine advertisements contain a toll-free number, with 82% using the 800 prefix. (Anonymous, 1999)

Interactivity has become a classic good news/bad news story. More and more companies have 800- numbers and websites, and they are increasingly promoting them in their brand messages to encourage customers to contact them. The bad news is that "listening" is often only skin deep- a technological façade of promises that ends up being unfulfilled. The second "mystery shopper" conducted by the University of Colorado' Integrated Marketing Communications Graduate Program found, once again, that more than half of interactive contacts with 200 US companies were fair to down right poor. Measurements were based on the ease/ difficulty of contacting the company, nature and thoroughness of the reply, friendliness of the interaction and follow up (Tom Duncan, 1999).

Increasing number of companies has toll-free phone lines and web sites, both of which were promoted as ways to keep contact with the consumers. Unfortunately, the special phone lines are usually just a promise of an afternoon of busy signals or long waits and Web services provide an advertising platform rather than a customer service platform. (Herbert Jack Rothfled, 2000).

### 3. Research Objectives

Present study has been undertaken with the objective to know from the consumers the experiences they have had when they used the toll-free numbers. This includes:

- The source from where they came to know about the toll-free numbers
- Perceptions about using toll-free numbers
- Frequency of usage
- Institutions and organizations they have tried to contact using toll-free numbers
- The problems encountered by them
- Post usage reactions and managerial implications

### 4. Research Design

A pre-designed questionnaire on a five point scale was used to collect the primary data from the respondents (experiences). The questionnaire was framed to elicit the experiences of the respondents on the following three usage phases.

#### 4.1 Pre-usage phase

- Awareness about toll-free numbers
- Perceived utility of toll-free numbers

#### 4.2 Usage phase

- Frequency of toll-free numbers called
- Reasons for usage
- Institutions / Organizations called

#### 4.3 Post – usage phase

- Problems encountered while using toll-free numbers
- Perceived training need for the staff

Three hundred questionnaires were distributed and after repeated calls two hundred and fifty two questionnaires were got back and out of which two hundred and forty questionnaires were found to be complete in all respects and the same have been taken as the sample for the study. Convenient sampling was used to collect the primary data from the residents of both the Emirates of Sharjah and Dubai. This was because the residents of UAE come from different countries having social, economical and cultural background.

### 5. Sample Profile

Demographic information reported on the survey indicated the following:

Male respondents represented 54% of the sample, while female respondents represented the remaining 46%, with 58% percent being under 25 years of age, 40% between 35 to 50 years of age and 2% over 50 years. The report also indicated that 67% of the respondents to be single and the remaining 33% to be married.

About 33% of the respondents reported to have studied up to school level, while 47% of the sample has done a bachelor degree and 16% have done their masters and the remaining 5% of the respondents are diploma holders. The income levels of the respondents were 60% of the sample getting up to AED 5000 per month, while 22% earned between AED 5000 and 10, 000, and 18% of the respondents earned over AED 10000 per month.

### 6. Survey Results

#### 6.1 Sources of Information

Print media 81%, Radio 66% and Word of mouth 50% in that order indicated the respondents as the sources through which they came to know about the toll-free numbers.

#### 6.2 Perception about Toll-free numbers

Seventy-five percent of the respondents informed that toll-free numbers are easy to use, while 68% feel that toll-free numbers are easy to recall and 67% of the sample opined that toll-free numbers are easy to register.

#### 6.3 Frequency of Usage

About 52% of the surveyed respondents informed that they have made up to 10 calls, 25% have made between 10 and 20

calls and 23% more than 20 calls.

#### 6.4 Period when calls made

Regarding the period during which these calls were made, 31% have called in the last two months, 27% during the last one year, 22% in the last four months and 20% in the last six and eight months.

#### 6.5 Institutions / Organizations called

The survey reveals that respondents used toll- free numbers to call the following institutions and services: Banking 86%, fast – food outlets 66%, Airlines 65%, Travel Agencies 64%, Insurance 57%, and Taxis 55%. The other institutions called by the respondents include Hospitals and Medical centers and Educational institutions each 50%, and both Hotels and Drinking water each 47%.

#### 6.6 Purpose for which calls made

The survey disclosed that 78% of the respondents used the toll-free numbers to get solutions for the problems faced by them, 75% to gather the required information and 69% to get the desired service.

#### 6.7 Type of problems encountered

The survey, however, showed that the respondents encountered problems while using the toll-free numbers. They disclosed the following as the major problems encountered by them: Long waiting time/ being put on hold 75%, no response / no answer 53%, unable to speak to the right person 47% and communication problems 40%. Apart from these problems, about 25% of the respondents informed that the persons answering the calls to be not informative and also not polite while responding.

#### 6.8 Post usage reactions

More than 80% of the surveyed respondents have opined that to improve the effective usage of toll-free numbers, staff should be available to attend calls; 76% and 74% of the sample respectively feel that customers should not be put on hold or made to wait and only the right person should respond.

More than 80% of the sample strongly feels that proper training should be given to staff answering toll-free calls. Training should focus on both making these staff to be more professional, polite and courteous when answering calls, and improve their communication skills to make them to be more informative and provide relevant information to the consumers.

### 7. Hypothesis Testing

No significant level of dependency or association could be established between variables and the major phases taken for the study.

However, significant level of association could be noted be-

tween the following phases.

H1 There is no significant level of association between perceived utility and problems encountered by the respondents

Table – 1 Perceived Utility of toll- free Operations \* Problems encountered while using toll free numbers - Cross tabulation

Table – 1 above table shows that there exists a very significant association between perceived utility of toll-free operations and problems encountered by the respondents using toll free numbers.

Sample who perceived the utility of the toll-free operations to

Count		Problems encountered while using toll free numbers			Total
		Less	More	Many	
Perceived Utility of toll free Operations	Low Utility	10	6	5	21
	High Utility	15	50	7	72
	Very High Utility	27	77	43	147
Total		52	133	55	240

#### Chi-Square Tests

Pearson Chi-Square	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
	23.545	4	.000

be high or very high, have encountered more problems.

H2 There is no significant level of association between perceived utility and perceived training need for staff / employees handling toll-free calls

Table –2 Perceived Utility of toll-free Operations \* Perceived training need for toll-free employees - Cross tabulation

Count

Perceived training need for toll-free / Staff / employees					Total
Perceived Utility of toll free Operations		Less Training need	More Training need	Intense Training need	
	Low Utility	6	9	6	21
	High Utility	15	34	23	72
	Very High Utility	6	67	74	147
Total		27	110	103	240

Chi-Square Tests

Pearson Chis	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
	23.180	4	.000

Table – 2 above shows that there exists a very significant association between perceived utility of toll-free operations and perceived training need for staff/ employees handling toll free numbers.

Sample who have perceived the utility of the toll-free operations to be high or very high, feel strongly that staff / employees handling toll-free calls should be properly and professionally trained.

H3 There is no significant level of association between frequency of toll-free usage and perceived training need for staff / employees handling toll free calls

Table – 3 Frequency of toll free usage \* Perceived training need for toll free employees - Cross tabulation

Count

Perceived Training Need for Staff handling toll-free calls					Total
Frequency of toll free usage		Less Training need	More Training need	Intense Training need	
	Low	14	74	51	139
	High	11	26	35	72
	Very High	5	9	15	29
Total		30	109	101	240

Chi-Square Tests

Pearson Chi-	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
	9.127	4	.050

Table – 3 above shows that there exists a significant association between frequency of toll free usage and perceived training need for staff/ employees handling toll free numbers. Sample whose frequency of toll free operations to be low or

high, in fact feel strongly that staff / employees handling toll-free calls should be properly and professionally trained.

Probably the experiences of these respondents may have prevented them from using toll free numbers more frequently and has also prompted them to express that more training should be given to the staff/ employees handling toll-free calls.

H4 There is no significant level of association between problems encountered while using toll free numbers and perceived training need for staff / employees handling toll free calls

Table – 4 Perceived training need for toll free employees \* Problems encountered while using toll free - Cross tabulation

Count

Problems encountered while using toll-free numbers					Total
Perceived training need for toll free Staff / employees		Less	More	Many	
	Less training Need	14	8	5	27
	More training Need	17	72	21	110
	Intense training Need	21	53	29	103
Total		52	133	55	240

Chi-Square Tests

Pearson Chi-Square	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
	24.294	4	.000

Table – 4 above shows that there exists a very significant association between problems encountered by the respondents while using toll free numbers and perceived training need for staff/ employees handling toll free numbers.

Sample who has encountered more problems while using toll free numbers feel strongly that staff / employees handling toll-free calls should be properly and professionally trained.

**Manegerial Implications**

Study shows that the respondents come to know about toll free numbers through print media, radio and word of mouth. This being the case organizations instead of spending their promotion budget on other media can spend more on these media, to advertise the toll free number.

This can be done by increasing the frequency of the advertisements giving the toll free number appearing in the print media currently used (e.g., newspapers, magazines) or can advertise the toll free number in other newspapers and magazines so far not advertised. Similarly ads announcing the toll

free numbers can be repeated more often in the radio channels, where it is presently advertised or new radio channels can be identified to broadcast the toll free number.

To improve the effective usage of toll free numbers consumers must be able to contact the organizations during any time of the day and organizations should ensure that there is always some staff available to attend consumers calls.

In case the requirement of the consumers can not be met immediately, instead of putting the consumers on hold or make them wait, the staff can inform the consumer that they will call back at the time which is suited to the consumer. This will also provide an opportunity for the right person to speak to the consumer.

As a part of improving customer service, internal marketing should be done to all the members of the staff who attend toll free calls, so that they are better informed and equipped to provide improved service to consumers.

Organizations can prepare a list of frequently asked questions and orient the staff who attend toll free calls with this information so that they can provide a more professional and thorough service to consumers. This list can be periodically updated as and when new questions are repeatedly raised or when new products / services are introduced or launched.

Staff handling toll free calls should be trained to be through professionals who can communicate effectively the relevant information in a polite and courteous manner. To successfully meet this requirement, organizations can customize their training programs and these training programs can be periodically updated and modified to suit the changing needs of the consumers and the organization.

### Limitations And Future Research

Firstly, any survey based method, including that adopted in this study, involves measurement error. In other words, the elicitation of a scale measurement, respondent's ability to accurately report their level of agreement with the survey statements (Kelli Bodey, Debra Grace, 2006). However, efforts were made to design the administered tool to be simple, easy to understand and respond. Convenient sampling was used to collect the data from residents living in and around the Emirates of Sharjah and Dubai.

Regarding future research, it is suggested that studies can be undertaken on specific service industries and or manufacturing organizations.

### Conclusion

While organizations have started to respond to the voices of their consumers, still plenty of scope is there for them to listen to their consumers more intently and fine tune their customer service strategies. This will encourage more and more consumers to ventilate their views and help the organizations immensely not only to improve their performances and strengthen relationships with their consumers but also their bottom line.

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