

South China Morning Post 南華早報

Time for Hong Kong to stop the nuisance calls, to protect the public and the industry

PUBLISHED : Thursday, 14 April, 2016, 11:51am

UPDATED : Thursday, 14 April, 2016, 11:51am

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Kai-Lung Hui says the latest consumer survey figures show a clear trend of declining effectiveness of telemarketing calls, again highlighting the need for stronger regulation

The impact of telemarketing calls has once again aroused public attention. [The latest survey](#) [1] commissioned by the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau shows that 96 per cent of respondents consider such calls a nuisance. Only 20 per cent listen to the content of the calls, down from 46 per cent in 2008. The effectiveness has dropped to 10 per cent from 21 per cent. These results echo those of a similar survey conducted by the privacy commissioner's office in 2014.

[*Cold calls are not only a nuisance, they're also ineffective*](#) [2]

Evidently, telemarketing calls lose their intended purpose when consumers consider them a nuisance. The government is reluctant to impose stronger regulation because the industry employs more than 20,000 workers. However, we should not sustain an industry just because it employs many people, when they harass others without creating corresponding benefits to society.

The surveys in 2008, 2014, and last year point to a consistent trend, that more and more people see person-to-person telemarketing calls as a nuisance. We don't need another survey to assess the impact. Stronger regulation is necessary. The question is how to do it.

One possibility is to cover such calls under the "Do Not Call" register to stop telemarketers calling people who have opted out. One result might be that telemarketers redirect calls to unregistered consumers, who may then register because of the excessive amount of calls. This has happened in US, which established such a register in 2001. However, the register cannot govern offshore callers.

[*Stop the cold calls: Hong Kong's privacy watchdog demands stricter rules on telemarketing*](#) [3]

Therefore, we need a mix of solutions. Extending the Do Not Call register can solve part of the problem. To address offshore callers, filtering technology could help. The government or the industry could establish a telemarketer list on an app for consumers to download and decide, on the fly, whether they want to answer the call.

To further improve the effectiveness of such filtering, the government could require all telemarketing callers to use a certain phone prefix. This way, it will be easier for consumers to

judge if a marketing call is legitimate. With this combination of solutions, we can sort consumers for telemarketers.

The US established its do not call register 15 years ago. Singapore established one two years ago. Both cover person-to-person calls. It is time for Hong Kong to act. The best way to protect the telemarketing industry is to help it run its business better, not by maintaining its inefficient operation that leads to disgruntled consumers.

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