



The Way Forward for Toll-Free: Notes from the Somos Stakeholders' Forum

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- + As an industry, we must work to spread awareness of Toll-Free Numbers and their current and future applications.
- + 70 percent of mobile searchers have used click-to-call to connect with a business directly from a search engine results page, and more than half of mobile searchers find it extremely important to be able to call a business when they are about to make a purchase.

When an industry evolves as significantly as Toll-Free, it helps to step back and think about what challenges the industry faces today, and how to meet those challenges as we move into the future.

That was exactly why we gathered several of our advisory board members for a Stakeholders' Forum at our **2016 Toll-Free User Summit**. On November 2, our president and CEO Gina Perini led a wideranging panel discussion that tapped into participants' expertise and provided some guidance for a roomful of industry professionals.

Advisory board members on the panel included:

- Greg Fernandez, National Provisioning Manager, THE Telco
- Jaime Zetterstrom, Vice President of Telecom Compliance, West Corporation
- Doug Gardner, Vice President and Head of Global Connectivity, Twilio
- Noah Rafalko, CEO, TSG Global
- Nick Sgroi, Vice President of Voice Business Solutions and Strategy, Bandwidth

Here are some of the focal points and key insights gleaned from the forum.

The Current State of Toll-Free

Just because younger generations prefer texting over voice, doesn't mean that voice communications is dead. In fact, 70 percent of mobile searchers have used click-to-call to connect with a business directly from a search engine results page, and more than half of mobile searchers find it extremely important to be able to call a business when they are about to make a purchase. Plus, calls convert to revenue 10 to 15 times more often than web leads do.

Toll-Free Numbers play a big role in voice interactions. This is true in the traditional sense in that Toll-Free Numbers are an extension of a brand's identity. But it is also true that Toll-Free Numbers are being used in nontraditional ways, including:

MULTIMODAL AND OMNICHANNEL COMMUNICATIONS

Toll-Free Numbers have evolved to be able to encompass all call center interactions, including voice, text, video chat, email, and customer relationship management (CRM) systems. Industry trends clearly indicate that omnichannel communications options are important to consumers, and are becoming more so. What consumers are really looking for is immediacy and satisfaction, no matter the communications channel.

MERGING ONLINE AND OFFLINE CUSTOMER CHANNELS

By using Toll-Free Numbers in web, radio, television and newspaper calls to action, businesses are tying these numbers directly to their CRM systems. Toll-Free Numbers are uniquely able to ride along all of those channels to drive consumer engagement and communications.

CLICK-TO-CALL AND CLICK-TO-CHAT

This under-the-radar industry disrupter can route thousands of numbers — many of which are not even displayed as numerals but instead as clickable links — to the same call center.

DATA CAPTURE

Because Toll-Free Numbers are excellent vehicles for capturing caller data, they are being used in areas from voice to SMS to drive data toward advanced analytics models.

DYNAMIC NUMBER INSERTION

Some businesses are using thousands of Toll-Free Numbers among their various landing sites to ensure that individual consumers will see the same dynamic number each time they visit a website, no matter what method they use to connect.

TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS

One example involves Toll-Free Numbers working in tandem with software that can recognize languages and shuttle the call to the appropriate queue.

The Challenges We Face

Amidst — and sometimes because of — this constant evolution and innovation, the Toll-Free industry is facing some significant challenges and disruptions. The Stakeholders' Forum panel elucidated a few of these challenges, which largely fell into four major categories:

BUILDING CONSUMER AWARENESS

Many millennials and members of Generation Z don't even know what a Toll-Free Number is because they can't wrap their minds around the idea of a call being "tolled." With communications trending ever more toward mobile devices and away from land lines and their antiquated longdistance models, consumers are not connecting with the words "Toll-Free Number" as much as perhaps they once were. It may even be necessary to rebrand or rename Toll-Free to appeal to a marketplace that has evolved past the language encoded within the Toll-Free name.

As an industry, we must work to spread awareness of Toll-Free Numbers and their current and future applications. This education should focus on the positive attributes of Toll-Free, such as conferred credibility and trust, social interaction capabilities and lack of geographical association.

The industry could also do a better job of educating consumers on the different ways they can interact with businesses via Toll-Free. A recent Somos consumer survey showed that while most respondents saw high value in texting with a business via a Toll-Free Number, only one-third of them were aware that sending text messages to a Toll-Free Number was even possible.

MEETING BUSINESSES AND CONSUMERS WHERE AND HOW THEY WANT TO BE REACHED

The Toll-Free industry needs to take the lead on educating business leaders on the power of modern communications tools and role Toll-Free can play relative to those tools. This means, first and foremost, educating business leaders on the way modern consumers prefer and expect to interact with companies. Increasingly, this means omnichannel support and communications.

But even if some businesses are willing to reach consumers through omnichannel interactions, they may not be able to because of the dearth of contemporary software models that seamlessly incorporate Toll-Free capabilities. Today's software developers are unaware of the nuances in telecom. So the onus is on our industry to simplify the technology's complexities so that software developers can integrate it into the apps and services they're building. In this way, the telecom industry can become more like the internet: a platform that is easy to access and develop upon — and within which it's easier to innovate.

THE NEED FOR A NEUTRAL REGISTRY FOR TOLL-FREE NUMBERS

The consensus amongst the panelists was clear: Without a neutral registry, the importance and value of a Toll-Free Number diminishes. The registry is essential for keeping track of who owns a Toll-Free Number and how it's routed. It is also vital to the security and reliability of the metadata that Toll-Free Numbers are so good at collecting.

A neutral registry would help ensure the trustworthiness of Toll-Free in the eyes of carriers, as well. These organizations, understandably, do not want to share important consumer data and information between each other, so a neutral registry would provide a safe harbor for the data that the industry relies upon to drive business.

And as the Toll-Free industry evolves to incorporate more text messaging capabilities, a neutral registry will be necessary to protect both SMS message data and the Responsible Organizations (Resp Orgs) that enable them. The registry would help identify the cause of any misrouted messages and insulate from blame a Resp Org that might otherwise be held responsible.

HARNESSING THE POWER OF TOLL-FREE ANALYTICS/BIG DATA

Considering the myriad analytics applications of Toll-Free, the industry can do a better job of leveraging big data to help further certain causes that are important to consumers and businesses. One such cause could be consumer protection from robocalls, which Toll-Free technology is uniquely positioned to enhance.

The Future of Toll-Free

The future of Toll-Free is wide open. Opinions and predictions varied, but the prevailing consensus was that the future of Toll-Free depends heavily upon industry professionals such as the ones who were in attendance.

In the end, three themes emerged:

DETECTING FRAUD

Deterring fraud with Toll-Free Numbers has become easier within the last five years, but there is still progress to be made. Panelists predicted that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) will step in to help in this regard, and that fraud deterrence and data protection measures such as adopting a neutral registry will help, as well. The industry's current method of intercarrier compensation will also need to be revised so that fraudsters don't have as much of a motivation to perpetrate their frauds.

REDUCING COSTS

Reducing costs will also be vitally important, as Toll-Free calls currently cost five to six times more than standard calls. A neutral registry will help bring costs down naturally, but further steps are needed.

DRIVING INNOVATION

Driving innovation means embracing the evolving role of Toll-Free as a feature-rich tool that can offer both known and currently unknown benefits to a wide array of businesses. But it also means preparing for the future by pushing for the creation of platforms that are able to bring together different technological components to create new Toll-Free solutions.

By paying attention to these themes, and continuing to hold substantive conversations such as the one held at the Stakeholders' Forum, the Toll-Free industry can confidently steer itself into a dynamic and profitable future. ■