

Towards World-class Telecoms through

TRANsparency

in Promoting Consumer Interests.

Quality of service

The primary role of the TRA is to protect consumer interests as competition is introduced into the telecommunications market in Bahrain. For this to be carried out effectively, there has to be a way of assessing the quality of services provided by operators.

In July 2003, the TRA issued a consultation on quality of service measurement and improvement. This consultation put forward a consistent framework for reporting on the performance of telecommunication services. It also set out an obligation for operators to provide information on their services and suggested operational targets for which they should aim.

Setting common measures allows consumers to compare operators and make choices for their service provision on a sound basis. It also allows the TRA to identify where there is room for improvement with regard to a particular service or operator. In this way consistent quality of service reporting sets the basis for both consumers to be informed and operators to demonstrate improvement.

Carrier pre-selection

Carrier pre-selection, or CPS, is a service that allows a consumer to access operators other than the one that supplies their phone line. In many countries, CPS has been instrumental in making the market for telecommunication services more competitive, often leading to a

lowering of prices. Given this, the TRA started a consultation in December 2003 to seek views on how CPS might be introduced in Bahrain.

The main questions posed in the consultation paper were whether consumers should be able to select one or more than one carrier, whether a pre-selected carrier should be obliged to carry all types of calls or specialize in just international or national calls, and how the costs of the scheme should be apportioned.

The consultation on Carrier pre-selection will result in a regulation that defines the way in which this service will operate in Bahrain. Particular attention will be given to consumer protection issues in this regulation.

Consumer protection

The Telecommunications Law sets out the Authority's responsibility for the protection of subscribers and users in terms of the tariffs charged, the availability, provision and quality of services, and the protection of personal particulars and privacy. This responsibility is explicitly noted in section 3(b) of the Telecommunications Law, making the TRA the only official body in the Kingdom of Bahrain with expressly stated powers to carry out its duties in the area of consumer protection in the telecommunications industry.



Consumer Issues

The Authority undertakes in carrying out its duties relating to telecommunications services in the manner best calculated to the tariffs charged for services; availability and provision of service; quality of services; and protection of personal particulars and privacy of services. SECTION (3) (b, 1)

All subscribers and users of telecommunications services in the Kingdom of Bahrain - residential or business - are regarded as consumers whom the Authority is responsible for protecting by ensuring that their best interests are served within the newly liberalized market. All have the right to lodge complaints with the Authority.

This responsibility is of vital importance in a liberalized market, where the protection of consumers' rights and interests must be supported by the force of Law in order to ensure that consumers reap the expected benefits of liberalization. All TRA consultations and decisions fully take into account the interests of consumers.

The TRA works with licensed operators in the Kingdom, giving advice and guidelines on consumer protection issues for all services offered by the operators.

Consumer complaints

The TRA has a responsibility to deal with consumer queries and complaints. The Telecommunications Law (section 56) sets how complaints involving subscribers and operators should be handled. Subscribers may refer their dispute to the Authority for investigation after failing to reach a resolution with their operator, or 60 days after submitting the complaint to the operator. The Authority has the right to act on behalf of consumers, and request details of the case from the operator. After

concluding its investigations, the Authority issues its decision, and can, where necessary enforce the payment of reasonable costs.

The Authority also has the power to bring forward regulations establishing the procedures to be followed in settling disputes referred to it. In future, through the usual consultation process, the TRA will consult the public on issues of complaint and dispute handling.

Consumer groups

Another method of implementing the open dialogue policy is the introduction of consumer representation through consumer advisory groups for each issue that affects consumers directly. The aim behind these advisory groups is to provide a direct route from the consumers to the TRA, to find out their needs and requirements. This will allow consumers to take an active role in issues that affect them, through the recommendations made to the TRA by these consumer advisory committees.

The Authority aims to establish a culture of consumer awareness of rights and privileges, ranging from exercising the right to lodge a complaint with the Authority to making the most of the variety offered by opening up the telecommunications market. This culture will ensure that consumers are sufficiently well informed to make the right choice between different operators and offers of service.