

What Is A Toll-Free Number And How Does It Work?

FCC Consumer Facts

Background

Toll-free numbers are numbers that begin with one of the following three-digit codes: 800, 888, 877, or 866. Toll-free numbers allow callers to reach businesses and/or individuals without being charged for the call. The charge for using a toll-free number is paid by the called party (the toll-free subscriber) instead of the calling party. Toll-free numbers can be dialed directly to your business or personal telephone line.

Toll-free numbers are very common and have proven successful for businesses, particularly in the areas of customer service and telemarketing. Toll-free service provides potential customers and others with a “free” and convenient way to contact businesses.

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, allowing that young adult to call home anytime without having to make a collect call or pay for the call.

Toll-Free Codes – 800, 888, 877, 866

Today, there are four toll-free codes: 800, 888, 877, and 866. Although 800, 888, 877, and 866 are all toll-free codes, they are not interchangeable. 1-800-234-5678 is not the same number as 1-888-234-5678. Calls to each toll-free number are routed to a particular local telephone number.

Toll-Free Directory Assistance

Toll-free directory assistance for some toll-free numbers can be obtained by calling 1-800-555-1212. The service is free. Not all toll-free numbers are listed – only the numbers for subscribers that choose to list them. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) plans to address how to promote competition among multiple providers of directory assistance, including directory assistance for toll-free numbers. In the meantime, 1-888-555-XXXX numbers are not being assigned to subscribers.

How Are Toll-Free Numbers Assigned?

Toll-free numbers are assigned on a first-come, first-served basis by entities referred to as “Responsible Organizations” or “RespOrgs,” or other toll-free service providers. These entities, which may or may not be telephone companies, have access to the SMS/800 database, which contains information regarding the status of all toll-free numbers. RespOrgs are certified by the SMS/800 database administrator, which manages toll-free service.

Contact a RespOrg or other toll-free service provider if you want to obtain a toll-free number. These entities can access the database and reserve a number for subscribers. There are several hundred RespOrgs and toll-free service providers in the United States. You can find a complete list on the SMS/800 Web site, www.sms800.com/, or you may call the SMS/800 Help Desk at 1-888-SMS-3300.

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What Is the FCC's Role?

The FCC regulates or sets the rules under which toll-free numbers can be used or obtained. The FCC requires that toll-free numbers be portable, meaning that a toll-free number subscriber can "port" his or her number to a new provider when changing toll-free number service providers. The FCC's rules designate the criteria for determining the status of each toll-free number, and prohibit "warehousing" and "hoarding" of toll-free numbers.

The FCC, however, is not involved in the day-to-day assignment of toll-free numbers, does not have direct access to the toll-free number database, and cannot provide any information about the status of a toll-free number or a request for a toll-free number. A telephone industry standards-setting organization establishes guidelines for toll-free numbers, and the guidelines must comply with the FCC's requirements.

What Is A "Vanity" Number and How Can I Get One?

A "vanity" number is a toll-free telephone number that also spells a person's or company's name or spells a word or acronym that is chosen by the subscriber, such as 1-800-FLOWERS or 1-888-NEW-CARS. To find out whether a specific toll-free number is available, contact any RespOrg or toll-free service provider.

"Warehousing/Hoarding" Toll-Free Numbers

"Warehousing" by toll-free service providers is prohibited by the FCC's rules. A toll-free service provider may not legally reserve a toll-free number without having an actual toll-free subscriber for whom the number is being reserved. RespOrgs or toll-free service providers who warehouse numbers are subject to penalties.

"Warehousing/Hoarding" Toll-Free Numbers (cont'd.)

"Hoarding" by subscribers is similarly prohibited and illegal. A subscriber may not acquire more toll-free numbers than the subscriber intends to use. Hoarding also includes "number brokering" – it is illegal for a subscriber to sell a toll-free number for a fee.

Filing a Complaint with the FCC

If you have a problem with a company providing toll-free numbers or service, first try to resolve it with that company or the company that bills you for the service. If you can't resolve it directly, you can file a complaint with the FCC. There is no charge for filing a complaint. You can file your complaint using an on-line complaint form found at esupport.fcc.gov/complaints.htm. You can also file your complaint with the FCC's Consumer Center by e-mailing fccinfo@fcc.gov; calling 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice or 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY; faxing 1-866-418-0232; or writing to:

Federal Communications Commission
Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20554.

What to Include in Your Complaint

The best way to provide all the information the FCC needs to process your complaint is to complete fully the on-line complaint form. When you open the on-line complaint form, you will be asked a series of questions that will take you to the particular section of the form you need to complete. If you do not use the on-line complaint form, your complaint, at a minimum, should indicate:

- your name, address, e-mail address, and phone number where you can be reached;
- the telephone and account numbers that are the subject of your complaint;

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What to Include in Your Complaint (cont'd.)

- the names and phone numbers of any companies involved with your complaint;
- the amount of any disputed charges, whether you paid them, whether you received a refund or adjustment to your bill, the amount of any adjustment or refund you have received, an explanation if the disputed charges are related to services in addition to residence or business telephone services; and
- the details of your complaint and any additional relevant information.

For More Information

For information about other telecommunications issues, visit the FCC's Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau site at www.fcc.gov/cgb, or contact the FCC's Consumer Center using the information provided for filing a complaint.

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To receive information on this and other FCC consumer topics through the Commission's electronic subscriber service, visit www.fcc.gov/cgb/contacts/.

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