Panel newsletter

COMMUNICATIONS CONSUMER PANEL

Special edition: **Consumer Panel calls on industry to improve mobile phone design**

On 27 January the Panel published new research looking at how to make mobile phones easier to use. This special edition of the Panel's newsletter takes an in-depth look at the research, highlighting the key findings and setting out the Panel's recommendations.

Usability of mobile phones is generally thought of as an issue for older and disabled users. But the Panel's view was that easier to use mobile phones would benefit everyone and research for this report shows that all users appreciate phones that are easy to use.

The purpose of the research was to identify the changes that can be made to the design and function of mobile phones that will make them easier to use, and therefore more appealing to mainstream users, while at the same time increasing the numbers of older and disabled users able to use them. This is important because while for most users an easier to use mobile phone is a nice-to-have, for many older and disabled users a usable phone is crucial for enabling them to use mobile services at all.

At the moment many older and disabled people have trouble using mobile phones and levels of mobile take up are substantially lower among these groups. This places them at a significant disadvantage in a society increasingly reliant on mobile services.

The report is based on research and trials with consumers conducted by Ricability, an independent consumer research charity, backed up by analysis of the existing research literature and discussions with key stakeholders.

In short…

Watch this space…

• Watch people talking about their views and experiences of using mobile phones that we produced for the launch of *Easier to use mobile phones*. Go to our home page www.communications consumerpanel.org.uk

• In February the Panel will submit a response to the CAP/BCAP consultation on the advertising of broadband speeds.

• In March the Panel will submit a response to Ofcom's Annual Plan consultation.

Panel meetings…

To read minutes from previous meetings go to:
http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/smartweb/agenda-and-minutes/2010

Key findings

1. **A number of simple improvements could benefit all users.** The research identified a number of improvements that could be made to mobile handsets that would benefit all users, demonstrating that improving usability can have benefits for mainstream users while at the same time widening access for older and disabled users.

2. **Increased facility to customise could greatly increase usability for a wide range of users**, including older and disabled users.

3. **Older and disabled people often do not have the information they need to choose a phone that meets their needs**, or know where to get that information.

The analysis highlights a number of areas in which stakeholders could make improvements that would increase usability for all users, including older and disabled users. Areas where improvements could be delivered are:

- Implementing basic hardware and software improvements that would increase usability. The starting point should be those areas that would improve usability for all users, e.g. ensuring phones provide feedback to indicate when a key has been pressed, have backlit key labels to make the numbers/letters/symbols on the keys easier to see, and that the phone size and shape allows one-handed use.
- Maximising the opportunities offered by customisation, with pre-set options that can then be further refined.
- Testing the usability of phones with consumers, including older and disabled consumers, in a way that takes account of their particular needs. Given the wide range of different needs and the complexity of ensuring that different features work well together, testing phones during and after the development process, including with older and disabled users, would be an important way of ensuring usability for a wide range of potential users.
- Ensuring the sales and post-sales environment more effectively meets the needs of older and disabled people through a combination of better product availability, information and support.

A number of different stakeholders have a role in making these improvements happen, including:

- Manufacturers, including manufacturers of specialist as well as mainstream phones;

- Retailers, including retail outlets of mobile network operators and independents;
- Mobile network operators; and
- Voluntary and third sector organisations.

The report contains recommendations for each of these different groups. For instance, manufacturers, operators, retailers and voluntary and third sector organisations are urged to work together to provide consumers with better information about the usability of current and future mobile phones, particularly those features most likely to meet the needs of older and disabled consumers. This could include the development of an industry-wide, consumer-facing labelling system that lets consumers know at a glance whether a handset is likely to meet their particular needs.

The report also recommends that:
- retailers should stock a wider range of mobile phones, including accessible models, and to provide better staff training to help people choose the phone that meets their needs;
- operators should include older people among the audience segments they use for selecting and marketing phones; and
- voluntary organisations should publicise information about what phones and features are available for their client groups.

Details of all the Panel's recommendations can be found in the full report, which is available on the Panel's website: www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk

On the website you can also see a video of some of the research participants talking about their views and experiences on the usability of mobile phones.

Over the coming months the Panel will be working closely with Ofcom and members of the eAccessibilty Forum led by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to take forward the recommendations in the report.