

# Your Number is Up

---

If you don't have an 0800 (call free) telephone number within the next five years you will probably be out of business. That's the clear message from what has already happened to American companies.

When you make contact with a company in America to place an order, request information, deal with a query or contact their customer service the call is nearly always free. One American thought it a "neat idea" that you could get prospects and customers to pay to contact you.

Whenever I make the statement at the top of this article British business either smiles, looks the other way or tells me that I'm mad to believe it will happen here. The evidence however is compelling and the main thrust for change will come from customers.

People are now making value judgements about the companies they deal with. At home they look through advertisements and if two companies are offering similar products or services but one has a free phone number, who do you think they will call first. It is revolutionising the independent travel sector and is increasingly becoming a key part of customer care lines.

These same people are now taking their "value judgements to work and looking for companies who want their business by offering 0800 numbers. Look what has happened to stationery buying since Viking Direct (an American company) entered the UK market. To really compete any similar organisation will have to offer free telephone contact, high investment in direct mail and a no quibble guarantee. But its the easy, direct access to their order taking department, at no cost by telephone that provides a key to their success.

In America individuals buy their own toll free numbers to give to children, so that they can phone home at any time. Madness you might think, but we live in dangerous times and it must be reassuring to know that your children can always contact you, from any location with a telephone. It actually costs most families very little because most of the calls are local, which in America are free. Anybody in the UK who is hooked up to cable T.V. probably enjoys the same luxury so how long will it be before we start buying our own 0800 numbers for personal use?

Americans do much more business by telephone than here in the UK. But this is changing as costs drive salesforces off the road and into offices to make telephone calls. Customers would never think to pay for a representatives visit to collect their order so why should they now pay the costs of placing the very same order by telephone.

The writing is on the wall and for those organisations who choose to read it first there is a real competitive advantage to be had. Once again the Americans lead the way, but will you be the next to follow?