

Cell Phone Directory Rings True

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I'm going to sign up our family cell phone for the new wireless phone directory, and I'll wager we won't receive a single unwanted call. Why not? Because the directory is now slated to have all the privacy controls I can imagine. You couldn't tell this by all the media coverage, however, which has been unanimously against the directory idea for the past three months.

What's the lesson for IT project managers? If your project will use customer data, get your privacy officer involved early to avoid the kind of media firestorm the wireless directory has encountered.

I read the first headline in mid-May: "Mobile number directory causing a stir." Six companies in the Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association (CTIA) were said to be pooling their millions of customer names and cell phone numbers into a common directory by year's end.

I had visions of telemarketers interrupting people during meetings, in their cars and on the beach, burning right through their calling-plan minutes. What a quick way to lose customers, I thought.

So what's changed my mind about the directory? Why do I think it's not the end of privacy?

If you read the press stories closely, you'll find, like I did, that the cell phone directory will include all the privacy controls that consumer advocates have demanded.

First, only 411 operators will be using the directory. It won't be published as

a book, posted on the Internet or sold outside the CTIA. This means it won't be feasible for telemarketers to obtain lists of cell phone numbers. That's worth repeating: Telemarketers won't be using the new directory to call you.

Second, participation in the directory will be on an opt-in basis for current customers. Users won't have to pay a dime or do a thing to have their numbers unlisted. This should be music to the ears of the 163 million Americans who now own a cell phone.

Once the directory is in place, new wireless customers will be told when they sign up that their numbers will be included in the directory unless they opt out.

Third, Americans who are still worried about receiving unwanted solicitations on their mobile phones can enter their numbers in the National Do Not Call Registry. Violators are subject to an \$11,000 fine per call. That's a hefty incentive for a telemarketer to avoid your cell phone if you've listed it in the registry.

So I'm just not worried about our cell phone number finding its way into the wrong hands. And having our number listed with 411 will be helpful for those needing to contact us in an emergency .

How many people share my view? Privacy & American Business, the pre-eminent researcher of public views on privacy, polled 568 cell phone users in 2002. One quarter were interested in participating in a cell phone directory, and 16% were concerned that friends, family members and colleagues don't currently have a way to find their wireless number in a pinch. The CTIA today claims that there is high demand among its members' customers for the directory.

If there are so many supporters of a cell phone directory, why does it tap such a nerve with everyone else? The main reason: The directory sponsors don't appear to have engaged their privacy officers before the story got away from them.

The CTIA didn't announce the privacy controls planned for the directory until a U.S. congressman had initiated legislation to force those controls to be added. When Verizon Communications Inc., the leading U.S. wireless carrier, backed out of the project citing privacy concerns, it confirmed suspicions among many that the directory project wasn't serious about privacy.

And the directory sponsors still have yet to address the criticism that, despite their promises to the contrary, the fine print in their current user agreements allows them to build a cell phone directory without user permission.

How can projects like the wireless directory avoid a privacy backlash? By first running the project plan past the privacy officer. Privacy staff will take the plan through a series of due-diligence questions (see Table 1) and help create informative and positive publicity.

So the next time you feel pressured to get a project involving personal information out the door fast, drop a line to the privacy office. It could be the difference between a project bonus and a major fire drill.

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