



Vodafone wins social responsibility plaudits  
with Telsis SMS Blacklist deployment

# Vodafone

## Telsis Customer Experience



Bullying and harassment by text and picture messaging undoubtedly occurs in every country where mobile phones are used. But New Zealand is so far the only nation where a large section of the population can easily and for free take active steps to avoid it by using the world's most advanced protection technology.

That they are able to do so is down to three companies working together, Telsis and its partner Ericsson, and their joint customer Vodafone, and to Vodafone's deployment of Telsis Blacklist – a network service that enables the targets of bullying and harassment to take back control, and to block their tormenters.

Vodafone's introduction of Blacklist has proved stunningly successful. It has generated the operator reams of favourable media comment in the home nation, and notable coverage overseas, the plaudits of child protection organisations and New Zealand's Government, plus world-wide telecoms industry recognition in the shape of a global award for consumer innovation.

The problem of bullying and harassment by text and picture messaging is a global one. A survey in New Zealand showed that as many as one in five school children receives nasty or threatening messages by text. Child protection organisations in other countries report similar, and in some cases, even more alarming statistics.

Like many operators, Vodafone had a call centre position dedicated to handling customer complaints about the twin problems, and to giving advice to customers about what they could do to minimise exposure to such attacks. If a customer received four unwanted messages from the same sender, then Vodafone would offer to put a manual block in place. But this was time consuming and far from ideal, and Vodafone was well aware that even at some 150 complaints a month, out of a total customer base of 2.5 million, it was probably still only the tip of an iceberg. Only customers who knew about the four-messages process got in touch to request the manual block. Many simply suffered in silence.

Throughout his career Vodafone CEO Russell Stanners has been passionate about corporate social responsibility. When an opportunity arose to partner with Parents Inc., a New Zealand non-profit organisation, in a project to educate children about the benefits and hazards of modern technology, Stanners directed that Vodafone should back the project both with money and staff time.

When the project with Parents Inc. got underway and Vodafone staff began visiting schools and colleges to talk to students on how to keep safe in a technological world, the human reality of bullying on the lives of the students became very real.

Parents Inc. director Bruce Pilbrow spells it out in very blunt terms: "Text bullying is often anonymous and crushes the confidence of the recipient, cruelly affecting their education and their general wellbeing. In extreme cases, we know it has led to children taking their own lives."

United in their desire to solve a problem in part enabled by modern communications technology, both Parents Inc. and Vodafone were frustrated that the same technology appeared unable to fix it. Said Kursten Shalfoon, former general manager of consumer marketing for Vodafone: "We were aware that some of the more sophisticated handsets had blocking applications on them, but it varies from handset to handset and, of course, many of the other phones don't have anything of the sort. We wanted to do it at a network level and for all phones, but the technology was simply not there – or so we thought."

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And so when Telsis and Ericsson showed Russell Stanners a comprehensive network level solution, the companies found themselves pushing at an open door.

What Telsis demonstrated was Blacklist, one of a portfolio of smart SMS network services aimed at enabling mobile operators to drive customer recruitment, reduce churn and in some cases increase revenues. Blacklist enables phone users to easily and quickly block the reception of text and picture messages from up to 20 numbers at any one time. Because Blacklist and all other smart SMS services by Telsis are network services, not handset apps, they work for all types of handsets irrespective of phone type or operating system. To block a malicious sender with Blacklist, the subscriber simply texts the offending phone number to a short code. From then on, no further text or picture messages are delivered, yet senders are unaware that their attacks are not getting through. Users can review and delete numbers in their Blacklist with similarly simple commands.

Stanners and the operator's technical team saw that Blacklist was a practical and effective counter to the problem of bullying and harassment by text and picture messaging, and therefore a way in which customers could be made safer. But they also recognised that Blacklist could generate a competitive or differentiating edge that might increase customer recruitment and reduce churn. What they did not foresee was just how much media interest would be generated by the launch.

Blacklist and its sister products run on a smart SMS services software platform deployed on commercial off-the-shelf servers. By taking just one service, an operator puts in place the foundation on which it can deploy as many others as it wishes. This buy-once-use-many-times philosophy was at the forefront of Vodafone's business case for the deployment of Blacklist. Said Shalfoon: "Blacklist was our first, but right from the start we had in mind the ability to roll out further parental controls, then move on to look at what we might do for other segments of our customer base."

Following trials, Blacklist was launched by Vodafone in November 2010 at a special event co-hosted by Parents Inc. Among the attendees at the event was Heather Powell whose son Michael, 15, had taken his own life. Mrs Powell told the media that Vodafone had kept in contact with her over the past year about the impending launch. She said Blacklist was a wonderful concept and well overdue.

Parents Inc.'s Bruce Pilbrow said at the launch: "We strongly back what Vodafone is doing. Blacklist takes power away from cowardly bullies and puts it back in the hands of the good guys."

The event made national television, radio and print media on scale that took Vodafone by surprise. "The media programme was the kind of process we had followed many times before and yet we were completely blown away by the level of coverage we got," observed Vodafone PR manager Michelle Baguley. "It was out of all proportion to the cost and generated many more times the coverage that we had achieved in the past with very much more expensive programmes. We realised that we had gauged the national mood on text bullying correctly and had really struck a chord with the public."

Within four weeks of the launch, some 2,000 Vodafone customers had started using Blacklist and the volume of complaints had fallen to such a low level that the call centre agent position previously full time on the issue had been re-deployed to other work.

Four months further on and some 16,000 people were using Blacklist and Vodafone was taking stock of the effect of the service on its key indicators. Said Shalfoon: "Blacklist makes us preferred network because of the functionality, and parents want to have their kids with us. It has given a major lift in brand awareness. Our competitors don't offer it, so we know it has churn and acquisition benefits. Not only is Blacklist unique to New Zealand, it is also the first service of its kind in the Vodafone Group which covers more than 371 million customers

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**Bruce Pilbrow, Parents Inc.**

around the world. This puts New Zealand at the front of the pack in terms of delivering world-leading, life changing innovation.

“Also, we have invested in a capability and Blacklist is our first productised way of using it. We’ve done the heavy lifting. Other offerings will emerge that use the capability.”

As the number of Blacklist users continued to climb post-launch, Vodafone and Telsis made a joint entry to the Global Innovations Awards, a recognition scheme operated by the world’s premier telecommunications industry publication, Global Telecoms Business. They found themselves up against stiff competition in the consumer innovation section, but when the awards were presented at a gala dinner in London, Vodafone and Telsis had triumphed.

Presenting the awards, Alan Burkitt-Gray, editor of Global Telecoms Business, commented: “Congratulations to all of this year’s award winners and to Vodafone New Zealand and Telsis for the Blacklist project. This is the fifth time we’ve run the Global Telecoms Business Innovation Awards and this year we saw more nominations, from a greater range of operators and vendors, than ever before. We started the awards in order to celebrate what the industry is doing, making a huge difference to the world, to all of us in business and as consumers. This is a sure sign the industry is working harder and harder to deliver exciting and innovative services to customers worldwide. We’ve seen a greater number of nominations for services directly aimed at businesses and consumers, designed to give them better services and make their lives easier.”

As news of the Global Telecoms Business Award circulated within the industry, Vodafone and Telsis received a letter of congratulation from the New Zealand Government.

The Hon Paula Bennett, Minister of Youth Affairs, wrote: “I would like to congratulate Vodafone and its technology partner Telsis on winning the Global Telecoms Business Consumer Service Innovation Award for its Blacklist service.

I appreciate the work Vodafone has done to ensure young people are protected from cyber bullying by text and picture messages. It is important that businesses like Vodafone are recognized for playing an in important party in promoting social responsibility.

I wish Vodafone all the best in developing future social responsibility initiatives benefitting young New Zealanders.”

Vodafone CEO Russell Stanners observed: “As an industry leader Vodafone takes its responsibility seriously. Whilst text and picture messaging are great technologies, it’s important we put the power in our customers’ hands so they have control over who contacts them. And it’s working. The number of complaints received to our text bullying service has plummeted to just a handful. We are proud to be able to offer Vodafone Blacklist free to all our customers.

“With Blacklist, we have demonstrated that for an operator to exercise corporate social responsibility need not imply all pain and no gain: the right initiative can actually generate wins for both the network, and for its subscribers.”

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**Russell Stanners, CEO,  
Vodafone New Zealand**

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