

What is a Toll-Free Number and How Does it Work?

Toll-free numbers are telephone numbers with distinct three-digit codes that can be dialed from landlines with no charge to the person placing the call. Such numbers allow callers to reach businesses and/or individuals out of the area without being charged a long-distance fee for the call.

Toll-free numbers are particularly common for customer-service calling. Toll-free service has traditionally provided potential customers and others with a free and convenient way to contact businesses. Wireless callers, however, will be charged for the airtime minutes used during a toll-free call unless they have an “unlimited calling” plan.

Customers can also send text messages to toll-free numbers, so long as those numbers are “text enabled,” and businesses can send texts in response.

Toll-free codes – 800, 888, 877, 866, 855, and 844.

Toll-free numbers are numbers that begin with one of the following three-digit codes: 800, 888, 877, 866, 855 or 844. Although 800, 888, 877, 866, 855 and 844 are all toll-free codes, they are not interchangeable. Dialing a number using a 1-800 prefix would reach a different recipient than dialing that number using a 1-888 prefix. Calls to each toll-free number are routed to a particular local telephone number.

How are toll-free numbers assigned?

Toll-free numbers are assigned on a first-come, first-served basis by entities called "Responsible Organizations" or "RespOrgs." Many of these entities also provide toll-free service. RespOrgs have access to a toll-free database that contains information regarding the status of all toll-free numbers. RespOrgs are certified by Somos, Inc., administrator of the toll-free number database.

You can contact a RespOrg if you want to obtain a toll-free number. If you need help locating a RespOrg, call or text the Somos Help Desk at 1-844-HEY SOMOS (1-844-439-7666), or visit www.somos.com/find-a-toll-free-number for assistance.

The FCC's role

The FCC sets the rules for getting and using toll-free numbers. The FCC requires that toll-free numbers be portable, meaning that a subscriber can "port," or move, their number to a new RespOrg when changing service providers.

However, the FCC is not involved in the actual assignment of toll-free numbers and cannot access the number database. Nor can the FCC provide any information about the status of a number.

What is a vanity number?

A "vanity" number is a toll-free telephone number that spells a name, word or acronym chosen by the subscriber, such as 1-800-FLOWERS or 1-888-NEW-CARS.

'Warehousing,' 'hoarding' and 'brokering' toll-free numbers

FCC rules prohibit RespOrgs from "warehousing" toll-free numbers. A RespOrg may not legally reserve a toll-free number without having an actual toll-free subscriber for whom the number is being reserved. RespOrgs who warehouse numbers are subject to penalties.

"Hoarding" by subscribers is similarly prohibited by FCC rules. A subscriber may not acquire more toll-free numbers than the subscriber intends to use. Hoarding also includes the illegal practice of "number brokering" – the selling or offering to sell a toll-free number.

Filing a complaint

You have multiple options for filing a complaint with the FCC:

- File a complaint online at consumercomplaints.fcc.gov
- By phone: 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322); TTY: 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322); ASL: 1-844-432-2275
- By mail (please include your name, address, contact information and as much detail about your complaint as possible):

Federal Communications Commission
Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
445 12th Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20554

Consumer Help Center

For more information on consumer issues, visit the FCC's Consumer Help Center at www.fcc.gov/consumers.

Accessible formats

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