

Your guide to customer service telephone numbers

What type of number to choose and why



Telephone accessibility is still a must-have



Cross-border e-commerce is booming business. More and more companies sell their products or services in more than one country.

Customer service accessibility is easy to arrange with digital channels. But almost 60% of customers and prospects grab the telephone when it comes to urgent or complicated questions.

So, when your e-commerce is crossing borders, one of the must-haves is a telephone number that your customers can call you on for help or advice.

When you operate internationally, you will require additional phone numbers: at least one for every country you are selling into. Unless you want your customers to call a foreign number. But let's face it; how customer-friendly is that?

5 reasons why telephony remains important

In the past years, the number of customer contact channels has grown significantly. Old channels like fax and regular mail have almost completely disappeared and been replaced by digital channels such as chat(bots) and social media. Email is used even less.

And then there's telephony. One of the oldest channels around but still alive and kicking. Research indicates it's often one of the most appreciated channels as well.

So just what are the reasons why telephony remains important?



Convenience

It's simple and it's convenient. No need for apps, accounts, typing, etc. Simply grab your phone, look up the number and call. Everyone knows how it's done, and it works (almost) everywhere.

1-on-1 personal connection

It's the only channel where you really have a 1-on-1 personal connection. Agents only have one telephone conversation at a time, and the caller gets the agent's full attention. As a result, questions are resolved faster, which contributes enormously to customer satisfaction.

Room for emotions

That personal connection makes room for emotions and empathy. Is a caller frustrated, angry, or sad? Agents can respond to those emotions and show understanding, reassure, or comfort. Positive emotions such as a laugh or joke more easily come across in speech than in written text.

Best for urgent & complicated matters

As soon as things become complicated or urgent, calling is the easiest and fastest channel. It's easier to explain a complicated issue in speech than in written text. There is less room for misunderstanding and it's easier to ask for clarification, explain a solution step by step and that way resolve issues faster.

Reliability

The fact that your company can be reached by phone makes it feel more reliable. Of course, this is less applicable for established brands. But if your brand is new, it's a good idea to provide customer service by phone.



How to choose the right type of service number

There are several types of phone numbers, each with their own advantages and disadvantages:

- Geographic
- Business/National/Non-geographic
- Toll-free/Freephone
- UIFN (Universal International Freephone Numbers)
- Premium

How do you find out which is the right choice?

There are several ways to find out which service number would work best for your company and the service you want to offer. It's easiest to start by deciding if you want your customers to pay (part of the costs) for calling you.

The price a consumer pays to call a number is different per type of number and can roughly be divided like this:

Free to call

- Toll-free (Freephone)
- UIFN (Universal International Freephone Number)

Local/regional calling costs

- Geographic
- Business/National/Non-geographic

Choose rate (per call or minute)

- Premium numbers

Differences between the types

There are 2 options for both the free to call numbers and the numbers with local/regional calling costs. The most significant differences between the types are:

Toll-free numbers vs. UIFN

- **Toll-free numbers** usually can only be called within a country, so you need a new number for each country you enter. These numbers are the most customer friendly as they are well-known for being free to call
- You can have the same **UIFN number** for several countries, but they are more expensive and take longer to activate than toll-free numbers. Also, UIFN numbers aren't available worldwide and the number format can confuse customers as they are less often used

Geographic numbers vs. national/business numbers

- **Geographic numbers** are great if you want your company to have a local or regional feel as they are tied to a specific area. You will probably need to change numbers if you move out of the area
- **National/business numbers** give the impression of a nationwide presence and aren't tied to a specific area. When moving to another part of the country, you won't have to change numbers

What do your competitors use?

Another way to determine the type of number is to do a little investigating and find out what kind of numbers your competitors use. You can easily find out online. It's also a smart way to see what is common in your type of business or in a specific country. Especially the latter is important to keep in mind. The types of numbers that are common in one country can be totally different in another country or much harder to obtain.

Don't forget about local legislation

Inbound customer service numbers must comply with relevant legislation in the country they are called from. This can apply to a wide range of aspects. From the classification of the prefix to how callers are informed about tariffs and charges.

The numbers must be registered with all the relevant authorities. Especially premium numbers have rules regarding the rates you are allowed to charge and for which services they can be used. Check out the websites of the national regulator to find out which rules apply to you.

We value your call

Having a number that's free to call sends an important message to your audience. We value your call and that's why we've made it as easy as possible for you to call us. There's no lower threshold than that. It shows you care about your customers. So, if customer satisfaction is something that's very important for your company, you know what number to choose.

Things to keep an eye on



1. Do you need a local address and representative

More and more countries require a local address and ID-proof of a local representative to be able to obtain a local telephone number. If you don't have local presence everywhere, make sure you know what is required.

2. Lengthy activation processes

Registering and activating your chosen numbers with all the relevant local parties can be a lengthy process. You need to provide the correct information to multiple organizations, whose administration systems may operate at a slow pace. It can take a lot longer than expected to activate your new numbers. You need to get the relevant processes underway well in advance of your planned publicity and go-live dates.

3. Is your number accessible to everyone

Phone numbers can't always be called from every phone/provider. Depending on the type of number and country, it's possible that a number is not accessible for (some of the) mobile callers. That's why sometimes you need two numbers from two providers, so you don't exclude people.

4. Independent and knowledgeable supplier

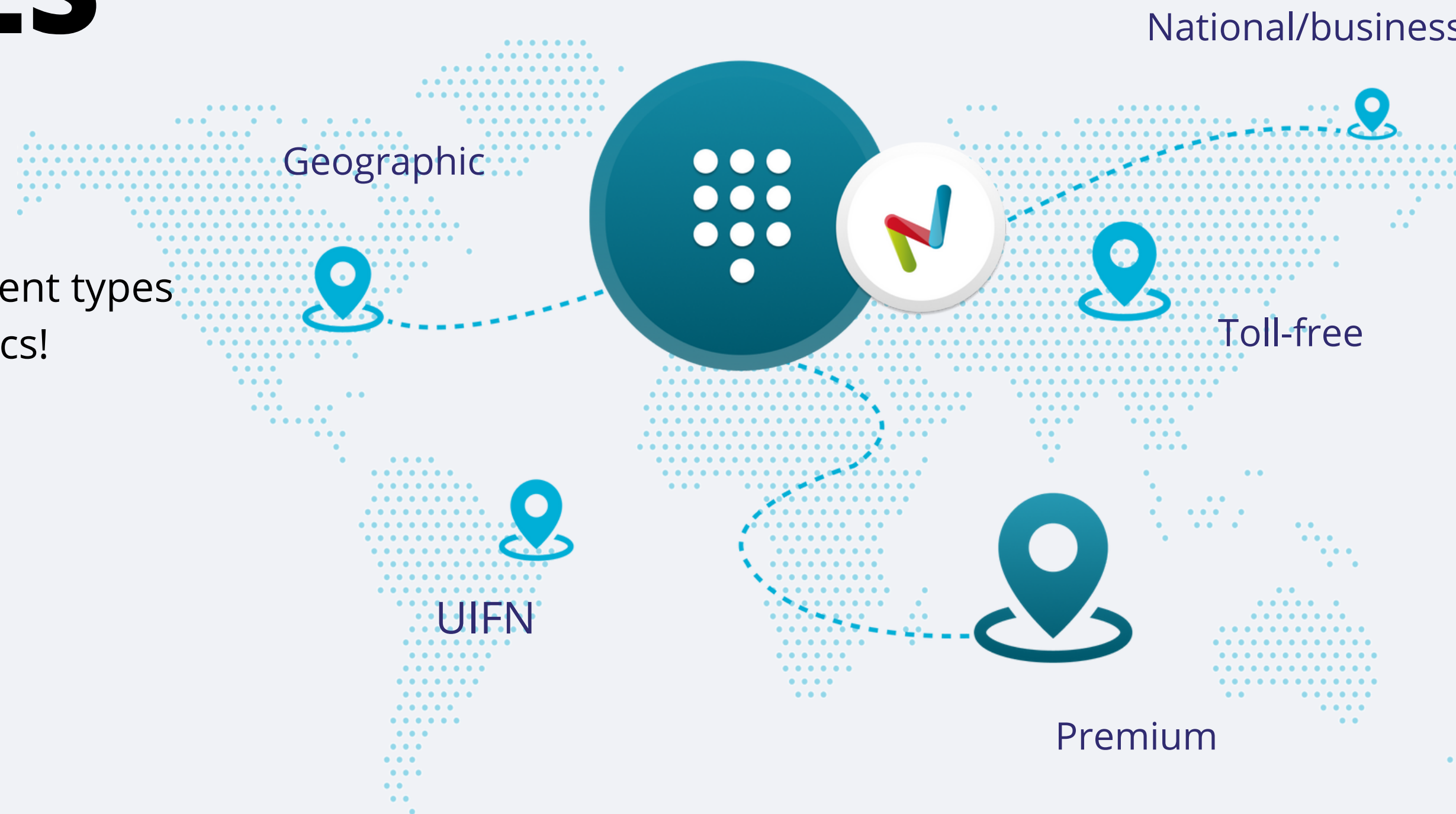
If your contact center platform supplier also provides your numbers, make sure you know if you can take these numbers with you if you ever want to switch platforms. This isn't always the case. You can easily avoid this by getting your numbers from an independent supplier with worldwide coverage, like us for example. This way you have one supplier for all your global number questions, and these are not tied to your platform.

5. Cultural perceptions

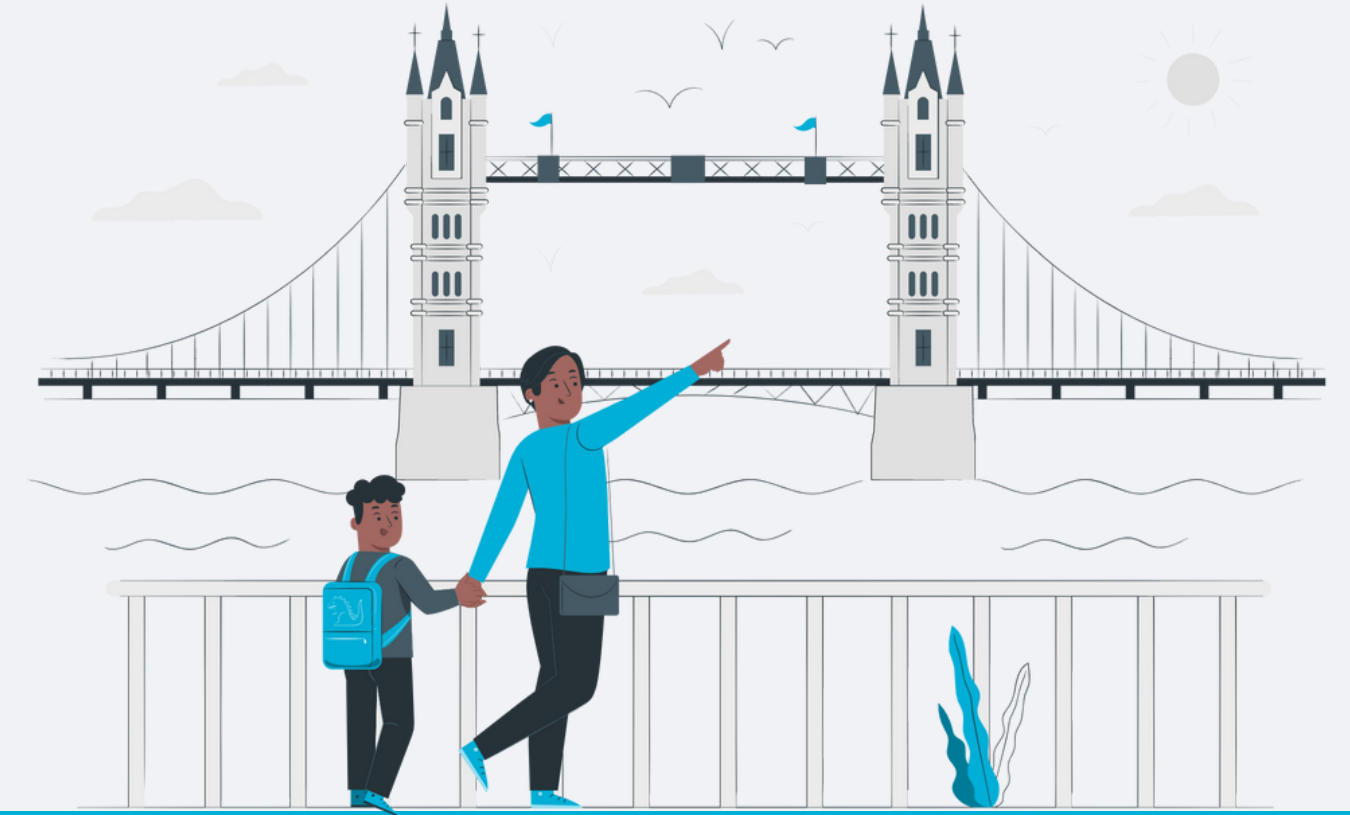
Many people's decisions to call customer service are influenced by their perception of the number itself. Is it going to be expensive? Will it lead to the right department? Is it a number that has a bad luck vibe? In some countries and cultures, there are strong associations with particular prefixes and number combinations. And these can vary from place to place. Choosing numbers your customers will easily call, in each country, takes a lot of behind-the-scenes knowledge.

THE TYPES

Time to dive into those different types of numbers and characteristics!



Geographic Numbers



Let's start off with geographical numbers. This is how telephone numbers were originally set up. These are local numbers that begin with an area code linked to a geographic location, like a city.

Today's technology enables calls made to a geographic number to be routed to a different location. This means the number is no longer bound to the location of the area code making it more versatile and easier to use from a technology point of view.

Nonetheless, local legislation could prohibit such routing. Make sure you're well informed about such restrictions for compliance reasons. These numbers can be supported by all kinds of additional services such as IVR's, peak-time overflow and extensive call statistics.

Geographic numbers

Advantages

- **Trustworthy:** everyone recognizes local numbers so callers have no misconceptions about this type of number
- **Local presence:** local numbers give the feeling of local presence of your company
- **Easily called:** because these numbers are so familiar and recognized, people easily call them
- **Low-cost number:** local callers only pay the local (low) cost tariff. Generally, they are cheap numbers to call from mobile as well
- **Easy to reach:** geographic numbers have no limitations when it comes to accessibility. They can be dialed from fixed and mobile lines and are also accessible from abroad
- **Always compliant:** this type of number is always compliant with national legislation
- **Flexible routing:** in most countries these numbers are technically no longer tied to a geographic location. Calls can easily be routed to another destination, both national and international (depending on local legislation), to any type of number or IP address (i.e. termination ID) and on any type of infrastructure.
- **Possibility to acquire number blocks:** get 10 - 1000 successive numbers to use for departments, locations and shops
- **Easy and quick to set-up**

Disadvantages

- **National presence:** if you want to create a feeling of national presence you're better off using a different type of number that doesn't feel like it's tied to a geographic area
- **Not ideal for marketing purposes:** if you regularly use different numbers for marketing purposes, geographic numbers are not very suitable for several reasons:
 - they are usually harder to remember and look less attractive
 - they have a local feel rather than national
 - callers must pay to call this number (even if it is only a local tariff). If you want to optimize accessibility/reachability, you're better off using toll-free numbers
- **A local business address and ID-proof** of a local representative is required in an increasing number of countries to be able to acquire and use such a number.

National/business Numbers



These are numbers that aren't tied to a geographic location. The name and formats vary per country which make them less uniform than other types of non-geographic numbers. These numbers usually have the same calling costs as geographic numbers.

They can be supported by all kinds of additional services such as IVR's, complex routing (both national and international), peak-time overflow and extensive call statistics.

National/business numbers

Advantages

- **National presence:** create the feeling of a nationwide presence as they aren't tied to a specific geographic area
- **Low-cost number:** calling costs are similar to a local/national call. For (mobile) callers, this type of number is generally included in the free minutes' bundles
- **Easy to reach:** there are no limitations when it comes to accessibility. Can be dialed from fixed and mobile lines and from abroad
- **Usually compliant with local legislation** because these numbers are charged at the rate of a local/national call. Always check to be certain as legislation varies per country
- **Choose your own number:** depending on availability
- **Possibility to acquire number blocks:** get 10 - 1000 successive numbers to use for departments, locations and shops
- **Short numbers are possible:** in several countries these numbers are also available in short format
- **Easy and quick to set-up**
- **No need to change numbers when moving** offices to a different location within a country. These phone numbers aren't tied to a geographic location
- **Flexible delivery:** Calls can easily be routed to another destination, both national and international (depending on local legislation), to any type of number or IP address (i.e. termination ID) and on any type of infrastructure

Disadvantages

- **Different formats:** the number formats and the names used to indicate them vary per country. This means they require more than basic knowledge to ensure you choose the right type of number. Some European examples:
 - In the Netherlands, they're called business numbers and start with 085 or 088
 - in the UK, they are the national numbers starting with 03. This number that came into place a few years ago to avoid confusion from callers about costs of ranges such as 0844, 0845 and 0870 numbers
 - in France, they are referred to as the Numéro Gris (Gray Numbers) ranging from 0806 to 0809 for numbers with regular length or starting with 30 or 31 for short telephone numbers
 - in Germany, this is a national subscriber number starting with 032
- **Not always recognized or popular:** in some countries, these formats aren't as well-known as other formats which can cause confusion regarding the costs of calling. And when there's confusion, people can be hesitant about calling
- **Not free:** callers only pay a local or national rate, but that's not the same as a free call. If you want to maximize the number of callers or avoid complaints about the costs of calling (especially if average call duration is long), you might be better off using a toll-free number

Toll-free/freephone Numbers



Toll-free numbers are also known as freephone numbers. These are the numbers that people around the world know and recognize as the number that's free to call from both fixed and mobile lines. If you want to make it easy for people to call you, this is the ideal customer service number.

Toll-free numbers can also be supported by all kinds of additional services such as IVR's, complex routing (both national and international), peak-time overflow and extensive call statistics.

Toll-free/freephone numbers

Advantages

- **National presence:** they create the feeling of a nationwide presence as they aren't tied to a specific geographic area
- **Trustworthy:** everyone recognizes toll-free numbers so callers have no misconceptions about this type of number
- **Easy to reach:** toll-free numbers have no limitations when it comes to accessibility. They can be dialed from fixed and mobile lines
- **Choose your own number:** depending on availability. You can even choose vanity numbers, where the numbers spell out to a term relating to your business (0800-Flowers)
- **Short numbers are possible:** in several countries these numbers are also available in short format
- **Look simpler** than most other types of numbers and therefore often easier to remember
- **Always compliant:** this type of number is always compliant with national legislation
- **Preferred number type:** customers prefer calling toll-free numbers to other types of numbers because they are free to call
- **Increases customer satisfaction** because the number is free to call. This can positively influence customer experience metrics such as NPS, CSAT, and CES.

- **Easy and quick to set-up**
- **Flexible delivery:** Calls can easily be routed to another destination, both national and international (depending on local legislation), to any type of number or IP address (i.e. termination ID) and on any type of infrastructure
- **No need to change numbers** when moving offices to a different location within a country. These phone numbers aren't tied to a geographic location

Disadvantages

- **Higher costs:** because these numbers are free to call, you pay all the calling costs. On top of that some countries have a surcharge for mobile calls which further increases your telephone bill. Be sure to know this in advance
- **Not accessible from abroad:** toll-free numbers usually can't be called from abroad. This varies per country. If they can, calls aren't free anymore. This can easily be solved by adding a geographic number for foreign callers

UIFN Numbers



UIFN is short for Universal International Tollfree Numbers. The UIFN service is regulated by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and only available in countries that participate in the UIFN program.

UIFN numbers can be supported by all kinds of additional services such as IVR's, complex routing (both national and international), peak-time overflow and extensive call statistics

UIFN numbers

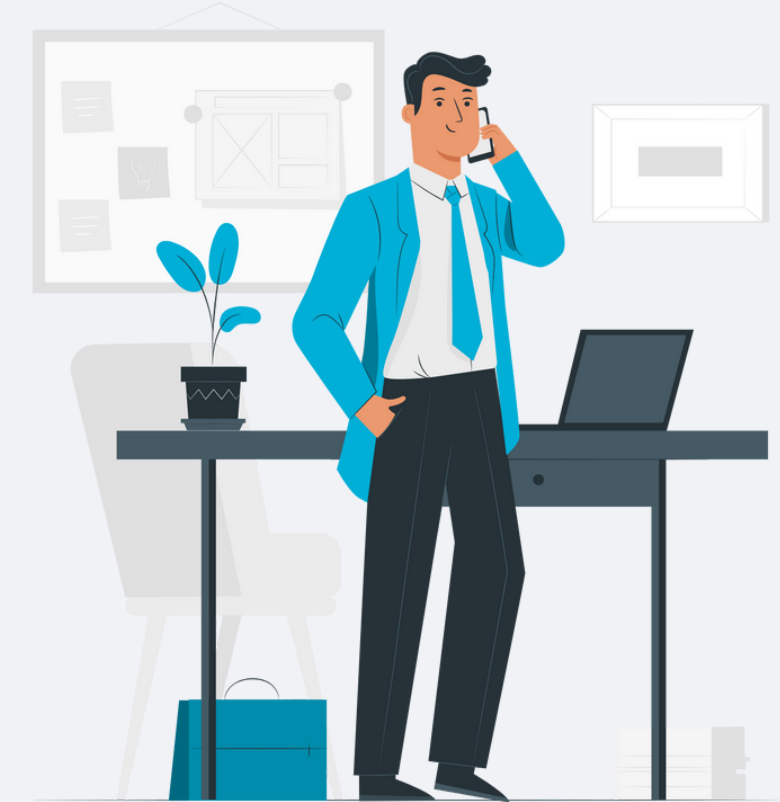
Advantages

- **1 number for various countries:** UIFN allows you to advertise 1 service number for various countries. Both convenient and money-saving for international marketing campaigns and for use on brochures and product packaging
- **Increases customer satisfaction** because the number is free to call. This can positively influence customer experience metrics such as NPS, CSAT, and CES.
- **Easy way to enter new markets:** activate the same number in a new country and you're good to go
- **Choose your own number:** depending on availability. You can even choose vanity numbers, where the numbers spell out to a term relating to your business (00800-Flowers)
- **Short numbers are possible:** in several countries these numbers are also available in short format
- **Always compliant:** this type of number is always compliant with national legislation
- **Look simpler** than most other types of numbers and therefore often easier to remember
- **Flexible delivery:** Calls can easily be routed to another destination, both national and international (depending on local legislation), to any type of number or IP address (i.e. termination ID) and on any type of infrastructure
- **No need to change numbers when moving** offices to a different location within a country. These phone numbers aren't tied to a geographic location

Disadvantages

- **Not universal:** though the name claims a worldwide reach, UIFN numbers are not really universal. Currently, they cover just over 50 countries worldwide which is considerably less than regular toll-free availability
- **Restrictions:** In various countries UIFN numbers aren't accessible via mobile lines or providers don't allow the use of UIFN numbers
- **Uses international formatting:** a caller must dial their country's international access code to connect. In many European countries the access code is the same: 00 meaning you can promote the number as 00800-XXXX XXXX but 00 isn't a universal access code. To avoid this issue, UIFN are also communicated as +800 XXXX XXX but not everyone knows what their country's international access code is and therefore what number to dial
- **Can cause confusion** because of the international format. Is the number free to call or not?
- **High costs:** because these numbers are regulated by the ITU, UIFN acquisition costs are significantly higher than other (toll-free) numbers. The monthly costs and costs per minute are also considerably higher
- **Long lead and activation times:** it can take about 6-8 weeks to get a number up and running

Premium numbers



Premium numbers are often used for more sales-oriented support such as ticketing and travel because customers also have the free option to buy tickets or book a holiday via the website. Other uses include tech support, information services (such as weather forecasts and directory inquiries), psychic hotlines, entertainment, charities, (adult) chat services and embassies.

Premium numbers can also be supported by all kinds of additional services such as IVR's, complex routing (both national and international), peak-time overflow and extensive call statistics.

Premium numbers

Advantages

- **Covers costs:** since callers pay to call, you do not have to cover all the telephone costs yourself. Depending on the rate you choose, you can even generate income by using premium numbers
- **Decide upon rate:** you can decide upon the rate yourself and whether you want callers to pay per minute or per call (depending on national legislation)
- **National presence:** they create the feeling of a nationwide presence as they aren't tied to a specific geographic area
- **Choose your own number:** depending on availability. You can even choose vanity numbers, where the numbers spell out to a term relating to your business (0900-Flowers)
- **Short numbers are possible:** in several countries these numbers are also available in short format
- **Look simpler** than most other types of numbers and therefore often easier to remember
- **Flexible delivery:** Calls can easily be routed to another destination, both national and international (depending on local legislation), to any type of number or IP address (i.e. termination ID) and on any type of infrastructure
- **No need to change numbers when moving** offices to a different location within a country. These phone numbers aren't tied to a geographic location

Disadvantages

- **Not compliant:** in many countries premium numbers are not allowed for customer service. For example, Europe has strict regulations regarding numbers used for customer service. If a customer has bought your product or service, they have bought access to telephone customer service. Meaning the numbers to call should either be free or have a local calling rate
- **Can cause complaints:** because the caller is charged to call you, this can lead to high costs and therefore complaints when this is not clearly communicated
- **Not accessible from abroad:** premium numbers usually can't be called from abroad. This varies per country.

Numbers compared

	Geographic	Business/national	Toll-free	UIFN	Premium
Appearance					
Easily recognized by callers as free to call	<i>Not applicable</i>	<i>Not applicable</i>	V	X	<i>Not applicable</i>
Easily called and recognizable	V	X	V	X	V
Creates a feeling of local presence	V	V	X	X	X
Creates a feeling of nation-wide presence	X	V	V	V	V
Availability & Accessibility					
Able to choose your own number	X	V	V	V	V
Able to choose vanity numbers	X	X	V	V	V
Able to use one number for various countries	X	X	X	V	X
Able to choose a short number	X	V	V	V	V
Keep number when moving to a different city of region	X	V	V	V	V
Easy and quick to set up, activate and port	V	V	V	X	V
Good accessibility from mobile lines and most national providers	V	V	V	X	V
Can be called from abroad	V	V	X	V	X
Geographically independent, calls can be routed via PSTN & SIP (depending on local legislation)	V	V	V	V	V
Inbound number can be used as outbound number	V	V	X	X	X
Pricing					
Free to call	X	X	V	V	X
Local rate	V	V	X	X	X
Premium rate	X	X	X	X	V
Able to choose rate & generate money using these number	X	X	X	X	V
Attractive pricing (both set-up and variable costs)	V	V	V	X	V
Legal compliancy					
Number compliant with local regulations when used for customer service	V	V	V	V	X

Key to sustainable success

At a time when products or services are more and more interchangeable, providing excellent customer service distinguishes brands from their competition. Brands that provide telephone customer service understand the added value of the human voice. It creates a more personal and lasting connection. This is crucial for customer satisfaction and your brand's reputation. It is the key to sustainable success.

Ask for help

Of course, you don't have to figure it all out by yourself. Yes, you are the one deciding type of number you want to use, but service number providers can advise you. Like us for example. We know which numbers are common, easy to use and where to obtain them. And we are happy to take all registration, activation, and routing work out of your hands. This will not only save you a lot of work but very likely also money because we can often supply better rates than your current providers.

Want to find out if we can help you save time and money?

Get in touch and we'll gladly help you out.



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Sound of Data international number coverage

Other countries on request. Termination possible worldwide.

Albania	Bulgaria	Georgia	Kosovo	Nigeria	Spain
Algeria	BurkinaFaso	Germany	Kuwait	Northern Mariana Islands	SriLanka
Angola	Cambodia	Ghana	Kyrgyzstan	Norway	St.Kitts & Nevis
Anguilla	Cameroon	Greece	Latvia	Oman	St.Lucia
Antigua & Barbuda	Canada	Grenada	Liechtenstein	Pakistan	St.Vincent & Grenadines
Argentina	Cayman Islands	Guadaloupe	Lithuania	Panama	Sweden
Australia	Chile	Guam	Luxembourg	Paraguay	Switzerland
Austria	China	Guatemala	Macao	Peru	Taiwan
Bahamas	Colombia	Honduras	Macedonia	Philippines	Tajikistan
Bahrain	Costa Rica	Hong Kong	Malaysia	Poland	Thailand
Bangladesh	Croatia	Hungary	Malta	Portugal	Trinidad & Tobago
Barbados	Cyprus	Iceland	Martinique	Puerto Rico	Tunisia
Belarus	Czech Republic	India	Mauritius	Qatar	Turkey
Belgium	Denmark	Indonesia	Mayotte	Reunion	Turks & Caicos Islands
Belize	Dominica	Ireland	Mexico	Romania	Uganda
Benin	Dominican Republic	Israel	Moldova	Russia	Ukraine
Bermuda	Ecuador	Italy	Monaco	Saudi Arabia	United Arab Emirates
Bolivia	Egypt	Ivory Coast	Montenegro	Serbia	United Kingdom
Bosnia	El Salvador	Jamaica	Montserrat	Seychelles	Uruguay
Botswana	Estonia	Japan	Morocco	Singapore	US Virgin Islands
Brazil	Finland	Jordan	Netherlands	Slovakia	Usa
British Virgin Islands	France	Kazakhstan	New Zealand	Slovenia	Venezuela
Brunei	French Guyana	Kenya	Nicaragua	South Africa	Vietnam
Bulgaria	Georgia	Kosovo	Nigeria	Spain	

About Sound of Data

Hey, it's me!

Why would anyone end a whitepaper with such a strange exclamation?

We do, because it centers around our reason of being. "Hey, it's me!" is the voice of today's consumer who is crying out for being serviced. He has bought your product, provided you with his personal details, but he rarely sees that information being transformed into something he truly values. Asking himself: "why do companies that know so much about me, treat me as just another call that needs to be switched?".

We do not accept that customers are still treated as if they are 'just another call in a queue', 'a KPI in a sales target' or 'missed service level'. We want to put the customer in the center of our communication technology: to create better customer experiences; to let customers know we care about them; to inform them properly and engage in a human way. You provide the human voice, we provide the inbound technology to facilitate that process.