

The Incredible Shrinking Phone Number



By Dave Robinett
CMO, #250 –
America's Mobile Speed Dial



In Randy Newman's 1977 hit song, he claimed "nobody likes short people." But it turns out that consumers do like *short phone numbers*. In the 1920s, phone numbers were fairly short – 5 digits, and used a mnemonic like "Tremont 1306" as an aid to remembering the first digit or two. But soon, the growth of the phone network required more numbers, and hence longer numbers to accommodate that growth. It is the same phenomenon that required the expansion from the original toll-free NPA of 800, to 888, 877, etc. and the addition of new area code overlays in major population centers.

By the 1950s the numbering plan needed to be extended to ten digits, and the Bell System called upon Professor George Miller of Harvard University, who was doing landmark research on memory. He discovered that a technique humans can use to deal with their memory limitations is to "chunk" data (such as long number strings) into smaller parts. This led directly to the format of the North American Dialing Plan format of (999) 999-9999.

So what kind of short numbers exist today? One distinction has to be made between landline and mobile networks. AT&T originally developed

what is now known as Vertical Service Codes (under the trademarked name CLASS) in the '60s and '70s. Examples are dialing *67 to hide your home number from a called party before making a call.

On both landline and mobile networks, the FCC controls "N11" numbers, such as the familiar 411 (directory assistance), 811 ("call before you dig") and 911 (emergency services).

In recent years, state departments of transportation have begun to utilize "abbreviated dialing codes" (ADCs) on signage, to give drivers an easy means of reaching the highway patrol or checking road conditions. These are typically three digits, preceded by a * (star) or # (pound) sign, such as *FHP, which connects to the Florida Highway Patrol (when dialed in that state).

Mobile carriers such as Verizon and Sprint also use ADCs that only work for their subscribers (and not for non-customers). Verizon customers can dial #MIN to check the minutes left on their calling plans, and Sprint customers can dial *2 to reach Customer Care. Importantly, unlike SMS shortcodes (the 5-6 digit addresses for text messages), ADCs are not typically coordinated across mobile carriers, so dialing one may not have the same result on all carriers. The one exception to this is the N11 codes and the highway ADCs.

In the last five years, two companies have been able to create cross-carrier ADCs on the major mobile carriers. Zoove and its division StarStar Mobile are able to provision vanity phone numbers that always begin with **, such as **MOVE. Mobile Direct Response, dba #250 – America's Mobile Speed Dial has



had its ADC provisioned on all the major mobile carriers in both the US and Canada, as well as on several CCA member networks, including U.S. Cellular, C Spire, Bluegrass Cellular, Viaero, Cellcom, Pioneer Cellular and West Central Wireless.

Why is this important to CCA members? Because advertisers, including non-profits have taken notice of this technology and their use of "mobile speed dials" will continue to grow. No carrier wants their subscriber to hear network error messages rather than

being able to successfully complete a call (especially when it works on larger carriers). Additionally, there is a public service benefit of enabling ADCs for government agencies, as well as in facilitating communication between consumers and businesses, which stimulates the greater economy.

#250 has taken it a step farther and has offered CCA carrier members the opportunity to obtain a "Spoken Keyword" on its platform, for the purpose of aiding local non-profits or community groups. Contact Kim Caronchi at kcaronchi@ccamobile.org for more information. 

#250 (pound two-fifty) is a speed dial that works right now on virtually all mobile phones in the US and Canada. Advertisers use it as a replacement for long phone numbers that consumers cannot remember when heard in Radio or TV ads. Consumers simply Dial #250 and Say a Keyword to connect to a business or non-profit – via an inbound phone call, and/or a text message reply. Watch an overview video at www.pound250.com.