



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on April 25, 2011

Company Purchasing 1-800 Telephone Numbers for Unsavory Venture

With the dramatic increase in cell phone use over the past several years, the once-common 1-800 toll-free business number has gone largely by the wayside. But one savvy company has found a creative — albeit unsavory — new use for discarded toll-free numbers. According to the Associated Press, over the past dozen or so years a little-known Philadelphia company called PrimeTel Communications has gained control of nearly one-quarter of all 1-800 toll-free numbers in the U.S. and Canada — an estimated 1.7 million numbers — and is using many of them to direct callers to a phone-sex service.



For example, reported [NewsChief.com](#), if you were to dial 1-800-Chicago, “instead of reaching a tourism hotline for the Windy City, you will hear a woman offering ‘one-on-one talk with a nasty girl’ for \$2.99 per minute.” Similar messages greet callers to 1-800-Metallica, 1-800-Cadillac, 1-800-Minolta, 1-800-Cameras, 1-800-Worship, and 1-800-Whirlpool, among others.

The company is so aggressive at co-opting the toll-free numbers that it often buys them up the moment they are relinquished by the previous, legitimate owners. “As of March, it administered more 800 numbers than any other company, including Verizon and AT&T,” reported AP.

Research showed that PrimeTel is currently the administrator of record for no less than 1,667,000 of the 7.87 million active 1-800 numbers. According to industry experts, the company also controls toll-free numbers using the “888” and “866” codes, giving it, by some industry estimates, control of several million toll-free lines.

AP noted that the majority of the numbers bought up by PrimeTel “contain messages redirecting callers to erotic chat lines operated by National A-1 Advertising, a company that shares an office building with PrimeTel, has common ownership, and lists many of the same people as executives or business contacts.”

Of course, most callers to the numbers quickly hang up once they realize they’ve been connected to something sleazy and despicable rather than the company or organization they had hoped to reach. But there are apparently sufficient callers who take the bait to make it profitable. “I guess enough people go for it that it makes business sense,” Aelea Christofferson of ATL Communications, another company specializing in toll-free numbers, told AP. She said that re-routing callers who have misdialed or called numbers that have been abandoned by businesses is a “big new industry”— and, of course, porn purveyors are naturally right there to cash in.

While it is not against the law to use toll-free numbers to solicit callers to pay for phone-sex with their credit cards, PrimeTel has been on the receiving end of complaints and lawsuits for “hoarding” phone



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numbers, a practice that is a violation of FCC rules. “The FCC has never taken formal action against PrimeTel or National A-1,” reported AP, although the feds have become more serious of late about investigating the practices of companies like PrimeTel that traffic in toll-free numbers.

Meanwhile, once legitimate toll-free numbers, many connected in name to well known companies, organizations, and even notable individuals, continue to be snapped up and used to dispense phone-porn. For example, a call to 1-800-Beatles will get you an invitation to connect to “exciting local people,” along with another toll-free number which connects to a phone-sex line.

A few years ago, when the New York City Fire Department gave up its toll-free number, 1-800-FIRETIP, it was immediately grabbed by PrimeTel and routed to a National A-1 phone-sex line (the number has since been disconnected). Similarly, callers to rape counseling hotlines in Maine and Maryland were shocked to be connected to a very different hotline.

Perhaps most famously, last year when the Republican National Committee printed a fundraising mailer with a toll-free number that had been snapped up by PrimeTel, callers who had hoped to connect to the political party were instead routed to one of A-1s “chat lines.”

As reported by [Politico.com](#), “A voter in Minnesota received the mailer and called the number intending to complain about the attempt to raise money with a form that looks like a government document. But the Minnesotan was instead directed to a second toll-free number that greets callers as ‘sexy guy’ before offering them the chance to talk with ‘real local students, housewives, and working girls from all over the country.’ ”

The incident became news when the individual forwarded the direct mail piece to one of the state’s Democratic congressmen, who, in turn, “shared it with the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee,” reported Politico.com.

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