



ROBERT ATKINSON

Chairman
North American Numbering Council

At the June meeting of the North American Numbering Council (NANC), Robert Atkinson assumed the chairmanship, replacing John Hoffman. NANPA Numbering News recently talked with Atkinson, former deputy chief of the FCC's Common Carrier Bureau, to get his thoughts on the group. Part I of our interview focuses on the challenges facing the council and on Atkinson's thoughts on how to strike a balance between maintaining an adequate supply of numbers to meet industry needs and satisfying demands for greater conservation.

What is the biggest challenge facing the NANC this year?

The ongoing challenge is to make sure there is an adequate supply of numbers for the telecommunications industry. Having an adequate supply of numbers really has two components: the potential for enlarging the supply and, at the same time, conserving the existing supply.

What we have had, from a historical point of view, is tension between stakeholders who want to increase the number of numbers and those who want to devote most of their time and energy to conserving numbers. Those are the two major pathways that need to be balanced and brought into some sort of harmony.

What's relatively new—and I might be the beneficiary of it—is that the sense of crisis that seemed to permeate the industry a year or two ago seems to have abated. The quantity of new numbers that are being consumed has declined substantially. A number of factors have coincided so that the pressure on the supply of numbers seems to be a lot less. It's a lot easier to develop consensus when there is less of a sense of crisis.

How do you see NANC balancing these historic tensions?

I think everybody starts from the same goal: we cannot run out of numbers. That's bad for consumers, it's bad for the industry, it's bad for everybody. It's just a question of how you achieve that goal, and probably both of these pathways are important.

In some respects, you can and should conserve. It's just like any other scarce resource. Conservation is a good idea. Of course, conservation has its own costs. Take conserving electricity. You can conserve electricity by shutting down factories and shutting down whole cities. And, of course, while that conserves electricity, it doesn't help the overall society, the economy, et cetera. You can go too far and take radical conservation measures that do more harm than good.

There's a spectrum of conservation measures, some of which are easy, some of which have relatively little or no collateral damage. One of the most obvious is thousands-block number pooling. It's an administrative process more than anything else—with some technology, of course. And computers allow it to be done more easily and less expensively than it could have been done with paper and pencil in the good old days.

What you don't want is hoarding of numbers by any carrier or organization. The ability to pool numbers creates less of an incentive for carriers to hoard numbers or to order or take more numbers than they reasonably could use. And government and administrative processes can make it painful or expensive to hoard numbers—in other words, penalties could be applied.

A lot of these things are administrative. When you get into any conservation measures that require huge capital costs and huge new investments, then you start saying, "Hmm, I wonder if that's worth it." When you get to these kinds of conservation

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measures, I think it's reasonable to start saying, "Why not just increase the number of numbers?" Now, of course, that has its own very strong negative set of impacts—mostly on consumers and on equipment. It may be that my old fax machine doesn't have the capability to dial more than 10 digits.

I think what is prudent is for the industry, the government, and so forth, to understand how you expand the number of numbers. Where would new digits appear? What would be the consequences? What would be the software? First, look at the process and lay out the plan. Then hardware manufacturers, software writers, carriers, service suppliers, and all the companies that use phone numbers (not only for telephone purposes but for data and other purposes) will know the capabilities or at least the possibility of adding digits, and where those digits would be, and how they would be implemented. Presumably, you could then incorporate that information into the next software update, the new design.

If and when a trigger is pulled (and that clearly would be a decision to be made by the governments of the countries sharing the numbering plan), if there's been a lot of lead time and notice, and the industry and the equipment manufacturers and others are reasonably well prepared, then you don't have a crisis and a major additional surprise expense to be incurred.

Expanding the numbering system would still be a trauma, presumably, for consumers. But even so, my personal guess is that people will get used to it, particularly if the equipment is easier to use, if we have different ways to dial, more autodialers or audiodialing, and more features to minimize the hassles.

Given time, I think these numbering issues—from both a conservation point of view and an expansion point of view—can be handled quite rationally and reasonably. And we can avoid trying to make either decision under the gun. ■