



Directory Enquiries



London Directory Enquiry Bureau, 1935

Nationalisation in 1912, brought most telephone companies together under the Post Office, and directory enquiry centres began to be set up locally. Centres only held information for their own area, and customers wanting information from further afield were put through to the supervisor at the exchange concerned.

In 1932 the first large centralised directory enquiry bureau was opened in London. Due to the vast numbers of calls to London and the size of the directory involved, a system of small loose-leaf books was devised. These books were then housed in 'pigeon-hole' compartments, with one member of staff dedicated to a set of compartments - each operator was responsible for over two metres of books.

In 1981 the directory phone books were replaced with microfiche, enabling much more information to be held in a smaller space. The microfiche cards were read on special readers. However, microfiche was an interim solution whilst

Britain's Directory Enquiry service began as an informal service in the 1880s to assist the country's few hundred telephone subscribers. It started with a simple volume of subscribers' names and their telephone numbers being held at telephone exchanges for the operators to consult when a request for a number was made.

BT prepared for a major change to the way Directory Enquiry staff worked.

The advent of computerisation

In 1978 trials were held at Leeds and Leatherhead on a new computer system to replace the printed books and microfiche.

Directory Assistance System (DAS) came into service in November 1984 with the 22 million directory entries being held on a database which was updated every 24 hours. Operators at any of the centres could all up numbers onto a screen at the touch of a button. By keying just the first six letters of a query into DAS the operator could see the required information within 1.5 seconds.

Automatic Voice Response

On 5 February 1990 Automatic Voice Response (AVR) was introduced in London to a new innovation in Directory Enquiry developments as part of BT's

£140-million Directory Enquiries improvement programme. Instead of staff giving out the



DAS terminal, c1984

numbers an automated voice gave the required information to customers, freeing the operator to take the next call. This had the advantages of speeding up the service, cutting the time taken to handle an enquiry from 39 to 25 seconds, and increasing the amount of calls taken.

The voice of AVR was actress Julie Berry. It took 60 hours to record all of BT's 6,000 exchange names, numbers and



standard phrases. It was not as simple as reciting names and numbers from a list, subtle inflections had to be observed as well as correct pronunciations of regional place names for which operators from that particular locality gave advice.

Redressing the balance

Charges for the Directory Enquiries service were introduced on 2 April 1991. Previously, although not every BT customer used the service they were still paying for it. BT proposed to charge customers only if and when they used the service. By charging 43.5 pence for each call made to Directory Enquiries, customer phone bills fell by six per cent.

Calls to Directory Enquiries remained free from public phone boxes and visually impaired and other disabled people who had difficulty in using phone books could register for free calls. A centre in Hillsborough dedicated to handle directory enquiries from blind and disabled people was officially opened by David Blunkett MP on 22 February 1991.



BT Directory Enquiries advert,

Deregulation of the Market

In line with developments across Europe, Oftel decided in 2001 to open up the UK directory enquiries market. From 10 December 2002, BT and other companies wishing to enter the market launched directory enquiry and information services. The new numbers all started with the prefix of 118 followed by three numbers. The number 192 was retained in parallel until 23 August when it ceased to exist.

BT's Directory Enquiry service used the number 118 500. A new flat-rate Directory Enquiries service for business was also introduced on 23 July.

In keeping with BT's international face a provision of services in a number of languages was introduced. In the publicity concerning the competition, BT's commitment to a quality service did not go unnoticed. According to a study in September 2003 into the 118 services by market researchers

ICM – BT's 118 500 Directory Enquiry service was the most accurate with a 96 per cent success rate for residential searches as well as the fastest with an average call lasting 56 seconds.

Good work

In 2005 BT's Directory Enquiry service raised money for Comic Relief. From 28 February to 13 March callers to 118 500 heard the famous voices of Lenny Henry and Alistair McGowan, explaining that BT would donate five pence to Comic Relief for every call, up to a quarter of a million pounds



Directory Enquiries timeline

1879	The Telephone Company opened the first telephone exchange in the UK in Coleman Street in the City of London, with only seven subscribers
1880	On 15 January The Telephone Company issued the first phone book containing 248 London personal and business names, but no telephone numbers
1932	<p>The first large centralised Directory Enquiry Bureau was opened in London, and loose leafed index books in individual pigeonholes were introduced.</p> <p>The policy adopted for allowing free directory enquiries even if the call required connection to a distant exchange for further advice.</p>
1960	Introduction of call queuing equipment installed to allow even distribution of enquiries amongst staff.
1983	A new International Directory Enquiry centre opened at Irvine, Scotland, for customers outside of London to dial "153". Customers in London continued to dial "102" or "103" for the country they required.
1984	Directory Assistance System (DAS) computer database of directory entries comes into service
1990	On 5 February Julie Berry becomes the voice of Directory Enquiries with the introduction of Automatic Voice Response (AVR) in London.
1990	Phone Base introduced for business customers to access BT DQ from their PC charged at the rate for an ordinary telephone call or a second system, Phone Disc, for an annual charge.
1991	Charges were introduced in April 1991, so that only those using the Directory Enquiry service paid for it.
2002	Following Ofcom's decision to introduce competition into the UK Directory Enquiry market. 118 500 becomes the new number for BT Directory Enquiries in December (with 192 being withdrawn in August 2003).
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