Final Transcript

SPEAKERS

Peter Kaplan
Chuck Harwood
Aaron Foss
Kati Daffan

PRESENTATION

P. Kaplan   Good morning everyone. Welcome to our Robocall Challenge Press Conference. I'm Peter Kaplan from the Office of Public Affairs. If you could please turn off any devices that make noise now that would be great.

                     You're going to hear from Chuck Harwood, the Acting Director of the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection. Chuck's going to give some remarks and then present the award to our winners. Then we'll take questions from media here in the room and over the phone.

                     With that I'll turn it over to Chuck.

C. Harwood   Thank you, Peter. Good morning to those of you in the room and also on the phone. We're here to announce the winners of the FTC's Robocall

Challenge. We charged innovators across the nation to stop the illegal

calls that interrupt our lives at all hours of the day and night.

Illegal robocalls not only invade our privacy but they're virtually always

pitching, pitching some sort of fraudulent product or service. The FTC

gets some 200,000, that's right, 200,000 complaints from consumers every

month about these calls, more than we get on any other subject.

Consumers are clearly fed up.

To address a problem as big and frustrating as illegal robocalls, our goals

as a response … compromising, nimble, creative and multi-dimensional.

First, through aggressive law enforcement the FTC has stopped many of

the businesses responsible for the billions, yes, that's billions of illegal

robocalls that are riddling our telecom system, including those ubiquitous

calls from "Rachel at Card Services."

Second, through an investigative technique we call a robocall "honeypot,"

our investigators are able to monitor robocalls and respond more quickly.

Third, through coordination of telecom experts, we're getting a better,

broader and deeper understanding of the changes in technology that have

made it so easy and cheap for lawbreakers to hide their identities while

blasting millions of calls.

And fourth, through videos, articles, blog posts, speeches and interviews

we've been suggesting the best ways for people to respond when a

robocall interrupts or disrupts whatever they're doing. But what's missing

from this multi-dimensional effort is a technological solution, one that

gives consumers tools to reduce robocalls or block them entirely.

That's why last October we issued our Robocall Challenge, a $50,000

prize for an individual or small group that could design a practical,

technical, best overall solution for this frustrating problem. We also

offered a non-monetary technology achievement award for a proposal

from a large organization, and the response was phenomenal.

We received almost 800 submissions ranging from the practical tips from

consumers who told us what they're doing today to reduce robocalls to

interesting ideas about long-term solutions that might discourage would be

robocallers. Because we, like all stakeholders, benefit from these

submissions, we're encouraging challenge participants to file public

versions of their proposals on our website. Directions are in today's press

release if you're interested in doing that.

When we issued the challenge we were looking for a great idea that could

be brought to market to help people deal with this illegal, national

nuisance and our judges found not one winning solution but three. Indeed,

they declared a tie between two individuals for the best overall solution

prize. They also recognized one corporation with a technology

achievement award for a submission by two of its engineers.

Now the judges used three straightforward criteria. Does it work? Is it

easy to use? Can it be rolled out?

The judges had to determine which of the proposals would be most

effective given realities like caller ID spoofing, telecommunication's

infrastructure limitations and the agility of the bad guys. The winning

submissions scored at the top on these criteria and they represent the spirit

of American ingenuity and innovation. The two individuals who will split

the prize money evenly for their proposals are Serdar Danis and Aaron

Foss.

Mr. Danis proposed a "Robocall Filtering System and Device with

Antonymous Blacklisting, Whitelisting, Graylisting and Caller ID Spoof

Detection." Yes, that was the title of his submission. His device would

analyze and block robocalls using software that could be implemented as a mobile app, an electronic device in a user's home or a feature of a provider's telephone service.

Unfortunately Mr. Danis could not be with us here today, but we are joined by the other prizewinner, Mr. Aaron Foss.

Mr. Foss's proposal, which he calls "Nomorobo," that's "Nomorobo," is a cloud-based solution that would use simultaneous ringing to allow incoming calls to be routed to a second phone line that would identify and hang up on illegal robocalls before they ring through to the user or consumer.

Mr. Foss, why don't you come on forward?

Next, the Technology Achievement Award, it goes to two engineers at Google, Daniel Klein and Dean Jackson. Their proposal, "Crowd-Sourced Caller Identification and Suppression," like the individual award winners, involves using automated algorithms that identify Spam callers.

Mr. Klein and Mr. Jackson, could you please come forward?

While the FTC can't officially endorse these products, we do endorse the use of technology and ingenuity to protect consumer privacy and prevent fraud. And while we recognize there's a lot of work still to be done and it's up to the winners to deal with IP issues and privacy and data security concerns, nevertheless, on behalf of the millions of consumers who have received unwanted and illegal robocalls I hope industry will take up the next challenge of bringing to market the products incorporating the ideas of our winners.

Today the story is about Serdar Danis and Aaron Foss, Daniel Klein and Dean Jackson. We admire their ingenuity and thoughtful approaches to building an effective way for consumers to fight back against illegal robocallers. But soon I hope the story will be about technology triumphing over such robocallers.

I would like to thank our panel of judges for their terrific work, Steve Bellovin, Chief Technology Officer at the Federal Trade Commission, Henning Schulzrinne, Chief Technology Officer at the FCC and Kara Swisher, Co-Executive Director of *All Things D*. Finally, thank you to Kati Daffan, the coordinator of the FTC's Robocall Challenge.

Now I'd be happy to take questions and Kati, why don't you join me up here?

I think we'll start with folks here in the room. If I could ask if any of you have a question, I think there are some in the audience that might, and if you would identify your affiliation that would be helpful to us. I'd like to limit the questions to call from media representatives. So please raise your hand.

R. Marsh   Rene Marsh from CNN. I'm wondering now that we have these ideas on the table how does it go on to be developed, eventually make its way onto the marketplace and then eventually be used so that people don't get these robocalls anymore?

C. Harwood   Some details of each of the three proposals will be available through our media packets. In addition, we will provide contact information for each of the three winning submissions. Companies that are interested in working with these submissions and going forward with them can reach out to any of our winners to get more information from them.

We think, by the way, that these submissions, each of these three submissions, is important because they represent a real breakthrough and

we think that's what will cause a lot of companies and people to want to reach out to them.

First of all, they work with any phone, not just a smartphone. A lot of the current things work only with smartphones, but these work with any phone. Secondly, they offer ideas that we haven't seen before.

For example, Mr. Foss's idea, it involves a method for deploying a filter that consumers can use via a cloud-based solution or cloud-based service. And they can access that filter through a simultaneous ring feature from their current phone. So in fact it requires no additional hardware.

The other two solutions involve situations where the winners tackled caller ID spoofing problems in unique ways. Caller ID spoofing is a huge problem. Using algorithms and other techniques they came up with ways to actually screen out spoof calls from regular calls. So we think there are some real and promising ideas here.

The third way in which we think this is actually going to go forward and this robocall challenge is really helpful in the future is we've been hearing from other entrepreneurs, entrepreneurs who didn't necessarily enter this competition but were already thinking of solutions.

They are energized. They've got new ideas, new connections as a result of our effort and they've indicated they're also going to be going forward, either with their own ideas or with ideas similar to the ones we've heard about today.

W   …private sector now to pick up the ball to actually implement this, right?

C. Harwood   Right. The next charge in the challenge that I've made very clear is it's really up to the private sector. We've lain out and our winners have lain out solutions, solutions we believe are workable based on our judges, solutions we believe are workable based on what we know about the industry and now we're turning to private industries and we're saying, "Help us out. Help us use these ideas and this technology to block or reduce the number of robocalls consumers are receiving."

W   I was just curious, has technology really put a damper on the Do Not Call Registry? Does that even really work anymore now or is that why we're seeing this contest?

C. Harwood   The FTC has sued a number of companies over the past couple of years and those lawsuits have partly depended on Do Not Call registrations and

Do Not Call requirements. But in addition, obviously what we're seeing is that there are many, many calls out there that get through the system.

It doesn't matter whether consumers put their phone numbers on the registry and that's because of caller ID spoofing and other techniques that allow literally thousands of calls to be delivered almost simultaneously. So what we're seeing here is a multi-prong approach. This is one part of the broader approach, in addition to law enforcement, education, consumer educations, that we're using to try to go after the robocall problem.

But I would encourage consumers, in addition to other things, put your number on the Do Not Call Registry. If you really do not want to receive robocalls, that's yet another technique you can use to try to reduce the calls you receive.

And let me note one other thing. Even if your number is not on the Do Not Call Registry, it's still illegal to call you. It's illegal for companies to use any sort of prerecorded device to place calls to consumers without expressed written authorization from the consumer. So even if you're not on the registry, people shouldn't be calling using robocalls unless you've expressed and authorized them to do so.

But still, use the registry. Put your number on the registry. That will help

reduce calls as well.

W   Do you have any idea, like what is the ratio of calls that actually are

slipping through despite the Do Not Call Registry? How big is the

problem?

C. Harwood   I don't know how many slip through. We do know that we get 200,000

complaints about robocalls alone every month, which suggests that

200,000 consumers are receiving calls every month.

W   By having a contest like this I suspect you will open it up to some wacky

responses of ideas and things. Can you tell us what some of those might

have been?

C. Harwood   Wacky—I hate to characterize. I will say that we got a lot of interesting

ideas. Actually, if you got here early you would've seen some of these

pictures that we got as part of the challenge that were running on the scroll

here on the screen. In fact, we've turned some of those pictures into a

video I think, right Kati? Do you want to talk about that?

K. Daffan   The video actually includes consumer tips about what they're doing right

now to end illegal robocalls. So to your question, one of the nice things

about this challenge is that we got a whole range of types of submissions.

Some of them might have been a little bit wacky. Some were very useful,

practical tips that people are using today to reduce the number of illegal

calls they're getting and then there were some that were very long-term

types of solutions. So we took some of those tips and made them into a

video. And with respect to the long-term solutions and the other ideas,

that's why we're inviting people to file public comment.

C. Harwood   So the answer is—I should mention that not all the solutions we got were

technical solutions. We received quite a number of non-technical

solutions simply from consumers who talked about the kinds of things

they do on a regular basis to try to stop robocallers from getting to them.

Kati, do you remember some specifics?

K. Daffan   In terms of consumer tips, which I think is the most useful aspect of the

non-technical solutions; we had tips like some people have found that they

can find options through their carriers to block numbers. So one of the

tips is to check with your carrier or to investigate voice-over Internet

protocol carriers that might have options to deal with some illegal calls.

One of the tips is some consumers said that they use the tri-tone. That is a

disconnected tone that you hear when somebody's number isn't working.

Certain consumers said if they put that tone at the beginning of their

answering machine or voicemail then it would convince some of the

robocallers not to call them again.

And there were things like if you get a virtual number that has screening

capabilities and you kind of pass all of your calls through that number then

you can have it only screen good calls to your number. That's a solution

that would require you to change your phone number though.

So these are some of the things that people wrote in with that we thought

other consumers might like to hear about.

C. Harwood   Are there any other questions? Should we go to the phones? Operator, do

we have anybody on the phone that would like to ask a question?

Moderator   We have a question from Adrianne Jeffries with The Verge. Please go

ahead.

A. Jeffries   My question is for the winners. I was wondering if they have any specific

                     plans for what to do with the solutions starting now?

C. Harwood   Adrianne, let's do this. Rather than have them all come up to the

                     microphone now, we will provide contact information for them, including

                     email and phone numbers. So why don't you contact them separately.

                     That way you can ask them what their plans are regarding going forward.

A. Jeffries   Okay, thanks.

C. Harwood   I'm sorry; you can also contact our press office here if you're not able to

                     reach them and we'll put you in touch with them pronto.

                     Go ahead, next question?

Moderator   There are no other questions from the phone lines.

C. Harwood   In that case, let me check one more time for any other questions here in

                     the room. I guess not.

I want to thank you all very much and congratulations again to our winners. We really appreciate again the ingenuity and innovation you demonstrated in your submissions and we look forward to seeing your products or ideas; incorporating your products on the market soon. Thank you very much.

Moderator   That does conclude our conference for today. Thank you for your participation and for using AT&T Executive TeleConference. You may now disconnect.