

Who's selling your phone number?



It's Saturday night, and you hear the familiar beep of your cell phone alerting you that it received a message. No, it isn't a text from your sweetheart. It's an SMS from a shoe store, announcing a 60% markdown on the winter collection.

In Lebanon, as in many other countries, both small and major companies market their wares via text messages to potential customers.

NOW Lebanon spoke to several companies that send out SMS advertisements to potential customers, the majority of which said they get their numbers from a provider, a third-party business that sends SMS ads to its database of cell phone numbers on behalf of a client.

One marketing and sales director from a major furniture store told NOW Lebanon his company pays a provider between 2 and 4 cents per message, which get sent out to potential customers by the hundreds of thousands.

"There are at least 40 to 50 companies that work as providers," said the marketing director, who for professional reasons asked not to be named.

But where do providers get the cell phone numbers?

Rolla Thomas-Jean, marketing director of Citi-Furniture, whose company also uses a provider to send out SMS advertisements, said she believes providers get the numbers from the phone networks.

“We get our numbers from four different sources: from our customers [companies], from [Lebanon’s two mobile phone companies], and from our team specialized in gathering info,” said one representative from Broadnet, a leading provider. She also said her company sometimes reuses cell phone numbers it received from clients. “Of course we set certain limits,” she said. “If a restaurant gives us their list, we will use it for another clothes shop, for example, but not for another restaurant, which would be their competitor.” Moreover, she said, some companies specifically ask that their list be kept exclusive, part of a “confidential agreement.”

As for the role of Lebanon’s two mobile phone companies in selling cell phone numbers to businesses and providers, she declined to comment. “We can’t provide detail on how we get information from [Lebanon’s two mobile phone companies], or for what cost,” she said.

Bassil al-Achkar, a sales and marketing representative from **LibanCall** said that when someone buys a number, it is registered with the telecom company. “We get data from them directly,” he said.

But Hisham Ashcar, the COO of Al Barid, one of the most popular providers in the nation, denied getting data from Lebanon’s two mobile phone companies. “We usually provide [the client] with the software to help send their SMSs, and the client usually sends messages to their own database [of phone numbers].” He noted an **application for iPads and iPhones that reveals people’s personal information** based on their phone or license plate number.

“Data is widely available,” confirmed Antoine Boustani, advisor to Telecommunications Minister Charbel Nahhas, in an email exchange with NOW Lebanon. “There are several means to get a hold of data that nobody can control.”

But are SMS advertisements an invasion of privacy – and is it legal for companies to sell your number?

According to Boustani from the Telecom Ministry, telephone networks and stores are not legally allowed to sell numbers, “unless the client has asked that his number be in the public database.”

But then he added that it is up to the individual to take the initiative to specify that their number not be listed. When you purchase a cell phone line, your number becomes available to public database by default, said Boustani.

The same goes for stores. If a store or restaurant asks for your cell phone number, they are free to send you messages – and sell your number to other stores or providers – unless you specifically tell them not to, said Boustani.

Karim Saikali, the founder of e-firm **E-comLebanon.com**, said that he considers SMS advertising “a violation of respect and privacy.”

“In Europe and the US,” he added, “there is strict legislation [on redistribution of data.] The EU Information Society is particularly strict about **SPAM**, for example, but in Lebanon and other developing countries, there is no legislation whatsoever.”

But many marketers in the country feel otherwise.

“From a cultural perspective, people don’t seem to mind as much as in the West. People love it,” said a sales and marketing director for a car-rental company who recently moved to Lebanon from abroad. “They call back... they are actually happy to get text messages,” she said.