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## BUSINESS

### Consumers turn spotlight on Telkom

I-Net Bridge and Sumayya Ismail | Johannesburg, South Africa

16 January 2007 04:42

Frustrated South African consumers, led by the Telecommunications Action Group (TAG), will on Friday publish a full-page advert in the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper calling for the reform of the telecommunications sector in the country.

"We took this action because as consumers we are tired of the exorbitant costs of telecommunications in South Africa and the poor service from Telkom," TAG founder Alastair Otter said in a statement on Tuesday.

The advert was paid for by individual consumers who donated between R100 and R1 000 towards the campaign. Otter said he had also received proposals from businesses offering to put up half the money for the cost of the advert, but he turned them down.

"That's not our point to go that route," he told the *Mail & Guardian Online*.

"For an individual who doesn't have more than a few hundred rand to give [and contributes something anyway], that's what we want -- those individuals and small businesses," he said.

The TAG advert is based on the very successful Spread Firefox advert campaign, which was published in the *New York Times*, and presented consumers with an alternative to Microsoft's Internet Explorer. Like Spread Firefox, this campaign will also include the names of all the contributors to the advert.

Otter said that the campaign has already raised over R60 000, and still needs to collect another R20 000, which has been pledged but not paid. The cost of Friday's *M&G* advert is "[about] R40 000 to R45 000" -- the extra money will go towards future campaigns, such as billboards or other similar causes, like Hellkom, Otter said.

"We are hoping this will spark some kind of debate," he told *M&G*



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"Since we started this campaign we have heard countless stories from consumers who have been trying for months, sometimes even years, to have telephone lines and broadband internet connections installed," says Otter. "And with just a single fixed-line provider in the country there is no alternative to users but to accept the poor service."

"On top of this, South Africa has telecommunications costs that are among the highest in the world and these costs are a significant barrier to all South Africans benefiting from the information age."

The advert will highlight Telkom's ongoing monopoly over the telecommunication sector as well as the lack of action by the government and the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa) to change the situation.

"[The] government is a stakeholder in Telkom, and there is no drive from the government to change the status quo," Otter said.

"Icasa is charged with regulating the telecoms sector for the benefit of all South Africans. However, Icasa's lack of political will has ensured that Telkom has been allowed to profit financially while the country has waited for years for alternative operators to be licensed."

On Neotel, the recently licensed second national operator, Otter says: "We are glad that the licence has been awarded and that Neotel is starting operations. We are still concerned, however, that Neotel's consumer services are still many months away from realisation. For consumers there is still no alternative but to wait for Neotel to become operational."

Otter said that TAG didn't have any illusions about overwhelmingly changing the situation, but they hoped the advert would make consumers aware of their own frustrations and called on them to take action against the Telkom monopoly.

"What we want to achieve with the advert is to both highlight the exorbitant cost of telecommunications services in South Africa as well as encourage consumers to stand up and demand change.

"We initiated this campaign as individual consumers who have had enough. We hope that this first step will encourage others to take action as we have," says Otter.

At the time of going to print, Telkom had not responded to requests for comment.

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