

Investigation report

Summary	
Entity	Commonwealth Bank of Australia
Australian Company Number	123 123 124
Type of activity	Commercial electronic messaging
Relevant Legislation	Spam Act 2003 (Spam Act)
Findings	For the period from 22 November 2022 to 17 April 2024 Up to 34,859,742 contraventions of subsubsection 16(1) [unsolicited commercial electronic messages must not be sent] Up to 170,678,086 contraventions of subsection 18(1) [commercial electronic messages must contain a functional unsubscribe facility]
Date	14 August 2024

Background

- The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) commenced an investigation into Commonwealth Bank Australia's (CBA) compliance with the Spam Act on 9 January 2024 following a consumer complaint and other intelligence held by the ACMA.
- The ACMA's findings are based on eight submissions provided by CBA between 9 June 2023 and 29 April 2024, including in response to two ACMA compulsory information gathering notices on 10 January 2024 and 23 February 2024, and a disposition to make contraventions admissions received on 17 April 2024.
- 3. The commercial electronic messages (**CEMs**) subject to contravention findings are collectively referred to as the 'contravening messages', specifically:
 - Up to 271,923 Surepay CEMs sent between 22 November 2022 and 1 June 2023 in contravention of subsection 16(1) of the Spam Act (refer to Attachment A to this report);
 - Up to 1,506,333 Surepay CEMS sent between 22 November 2022 and 1 June 2023 in contravention of subsection 18(1) of the Spam Act (refer to Attachment A to this report);
 - c. Up to 34,587,819 CEMs sent between 1 January 2023 and 17 April 2024 in contravention of subsection 16(1) of the Spam Act (refer to **Attachment B** to this report); and
 - d. Up to 169,171,753 CEMs sent between 1 January 2023 and 17 April 2024 in contravention of subsection 18(1) of the Spam Act (refer to **Attachment B** to this report).
- 4. The reasons for the ACMA's findings, including the key elements which establish the contraventions, are set out below.

Relevant legislative provisions

Commercial electronic message

- 5. Under section 6 of the Spam Act, a CEM is an electronic message where, having regard to:
 - a. the content of the message; and
 - b. the way in which the message is presented; and
 - c. the content that can be located using links, telephone numbers or contact information (if any) set out in the message:

It would be concluded that the purpose, or one of the purposes, of the message is:

- d. to offer to supply goods or services; or
- e. to advertise or promote goods or services; or
- f. to advertise or promote a supplier, or prospective supplier, of goods or services; or [...]

Designated commercial electronic message (DCEM)

- 6. The Spam Act allows for the sending of messages with factual information only that contain the names, logos and contact details of businesses. There is no requirement to have consent or provide an unsubscribe for these types of messages under the Spam Act.
- 7. Under Schedule 1 to the Spam Act, an electronic message is a DCEM if:
 - a. The message consists of no more than factual information (with or without directly-related comment) and any or all of the following additional information:
 - (i) The name, logo and contact details of the individual or organisation who authorised the sending of the message [...]
 - b. Assuming that none of that additional information had been included in the message, the message would not have been a CEM [...]

Consent - subsection 16(1)

- 8. Under subsection 16(1) of the Spam Act, a person must not send, or cause to be sent, a CEM that has an Australian link and is not a DCEM.
- 9. Exceptions apply to this prohibition. Specifically, a person will not contravene subsection 16(1) of the Spam Act where:
 - a. the relevant electronic account-holder consented to the sending of the CEM (subsection 16(2));
 - b. a person did not know, or could not have ascertained, that the CEM has an Australian link (subsection 16(3)); or
 - c. a person sent the message, or caused the message to be sent, by mistake (subsection 16(4)).
- 10. Clause 6 of Schedule 2 to the Spam Act sets out when a person withdraws consent to receive CEMs. Relevantly, paragraph 6(1)(d) provides:
 - (d) the relevant electronic account-holder, or a user of the relevant account, sends the individual or organisation:
 - a message to the effect that the account-holder does not want to receive any further commercial electronic messages at that electronic address from or authorised by that individual or organisation; or
 - (ii) a message to similar effect.

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11. Clause 6 of Schedule 2 to the Spam Act states that withdrawal of consent takes effect at the end of the period of 5 business days beginning on the day the unsubscribe request was sent (if the unsubscribe request was sent as an electronic message).

Unsubscribe function in CEMs – subsection 18(1)

- 12. Under subsection 18(1) of the Spam Act, a person must not send, or cause to be sent, a CEM that has an Australian link and is not a DCEM unless the message includes a statement to the effect that the recipient may use an electronic address set out in the message to send an unsubscribe message to the individual or organisation who authorised the sending of the first-mentioned message (subparagraph 18(1)(c)(i)).
- 13. Subsection 18(1) does not apply if:
 - a. the message is a 'designated commercial electronic message' (paragraph 18(1)(b)),
 - b. a person did not know, or could not have ascertained, that a CEM has an Australian link (subsection 18(2)),
 - c. including an unsubscribe facility would be inconsistent with the terms of a contract or other agreement (subsection 18(3)), or
 - d. a person sent the CEM, or caused the CEM to be sent, by mistake (subsection 18(4)).

Evidential burden for exceptions

14. Under subsections 16(5) and 18(5) of the Spam Act, if an entity wishes to rely on any of the above exceptions, it bears the evidential burden in relation to that matter. This means that it needs to produce or point to evidence that suggests a reasonable possibility that the exception applies.

Reason for findings

Issue 1: CEMs must not be sent - section 16

- 15. To determine CBA's compliance with section 16 of the Spam Act, the ACMA has addressed the following:
 - a. Is CBA a 'person' to which section 16 of the Spam Act applies?
 - b. If so, did CBA send or cause the contravening messages to be sent?
 - c. If so, were the messages commercial?
 - d. If so, did the CEMs have an Australian link?
 - e. If so, were the CEMs designated as exempt (DCEMs) from the prohibition on sending unsolicited messages?
 - f. If not, did CBA claim that the CEMs were subject to any exceptions?
 - g. If so, did CBA meet the evidential burden in relation to these claims?
- 16. If these conditions or elements of the offence are met (and the person has not raised an exception which is supported by evidence) then contraventions are established.

Is CBA a 'person' to which section 16 of the Spam Act applies?

17. CBA is a company registered under the *Corporations Act 2001* and is therefore a 'person' for the purposes of the Spam Act.

Did CBA send, or cause to be sent, the contravening messages?

18. CBA admitted it sent the contravening messages in its submissions to the ACMA.

Were the messages commercial?

- 19. Section 6 of the Spam Act broadly defines a CEM as an electronic message where one of the purposes of the message is offering to supply, advertising or promoting, having regard to:
 - a. the content and presentation of the message; and
 - b. the content that can be located using links, phone numbers, or other contact information in the message.
- 20. For the contravening messages, the ACMA is satisfied that at least one of the purposes of the messages, was to advertise or promote CBA, CBA's products and services or third parties. Examples of messages are at **Attachments A** and **B**.
- 21. The ACMA assessed 955 unique templates provided by CBA that are used to send messages to its customers. The ACMA is satisfied about the commercial nature of the majority of the templates, and these were used by CBA to send the contravening messages. Some templates were considered commercial on the basis of the content of the template itself, while others were considered commercial based on the content that could be located using a link, telephone numbers, or contact information set out in the message.
- 22. Therefore, the contravening messages are CEMs.

Did the CEMs have an Australian link?

23. CBA's central management and business registration was in Australia when it sent the contravening messages. Therefore, the contravening messages had an Australian link.

Were the CEMs designated?

- 24. The contravening messages were not designated CEMs because:
 - a. they consisted of more than mere factual information and were commercial in nature (clause 2 of Schedule 1 to the Spam Act); and
 - b. CBA is not an entity of a type set out in clauses 3 or 4 of Schedule 1 to the Spam Act, i.e., a government body, registered charity, registered political party, or an educational institution.

Did CBA claim that any of the contravening messages were subject to any exceptions?

25. CBA did not satisfy the ACMA that the contravening messages were subject to any exceptions in the Spam Act, including that they were potentially DCEMs and therefore exempt from consent and unsubscribe requirements.

Respondent's submissions

- 26. CBA has made admissions it sent up to 34,859,742 CEMs to electronic addresses without consent, including more than 5 business days after the electronic account-holders made an unsubscribe attempt in contravention of the Spam Act.
- 27. CBA stated it sent the messages without consent because it had incorrectly classified some of the messages as 'service non-commercial' or 'compliance' messages. As a result, CBA did not classify some of the messages as CEMs or treated some of the messages as DCEMs which may be sent to consumers regardless of whether they had opted-out from marketing.

Conclusion

28. The ACMA is of the view that CBA has contravened subsection 16(1) of the Spam Act on up to 34,859,742 instances between 22 November 2022 and 17 April 2024, as the elements to establish contraventions are met.

Issue 2: CEMs must contain a functional unsubscribe facility - section 18

- 29. To determine CBA's compliance with section 18 of the Spam Act, the ACMA has addressed the following:
 - a. Is CBA a 'person' to which section 18 of the Spam Act applies?
 - b. If so, did CBA send or cause the contravening messages to be sent?
 - c. If so, were the messages commercial?
 - d. If so, did the CEMs have an Australian link?
 - e. If so, were the CEMs designated as exempt (DCEMs) from the prohibition on sending unsolicited messages?
 - If not, did the CEMs include a functional unsubscribe facility?
 - g. If not, did CBA claim that the CEMs were subject to any exceptions?
 - h. If so, did CBA meet the evidential burden in relation to these claims?
- 30. Where a matter at paragraph 29 has not been considered below, the ACMA considers it has already been established under Issue 1, above.

Did CBA send, or cause to be sent, CEMs without a functional unsubscribe facility?

- 31. The ACMA obtained information from CBA that it sent up to 170,678,086 CEMs without an unsubscribe facility in contravention of subsection 18(1) of the Spam Act. Specifically, CBA did not include a functional unsubscribe required under paragraph 18(1)(c) of the Spam Act:
 - a. a statement to the effect that the recipient may use an electronic address set out in the message to send an unsubscribe message to the individual or organisation who authorised the sending of the first-mentioned message; or
 - b. a statement to similar effect.
- 32. Due to the use of marketing templates and the scale of the messaging activity, the figures provided cannot be verified as exact.

Did CBA claim that any of the contravening messages were subject to any exceptions?

33. CBA did not satisfy the ACMA that the contravening messages were subject to any exceptions in the Spam Act, including that they were potentially DCEMs and therefore exempt from consent and unsubscribe requirements.

Respondent's submissions

- 34. CBA has made admissions about having sent up to 170,678,086 CEMs in contravention of the Spam Act.
- 35. CBA stated it sent the messages without an unsubscribe facility because it had incorrectly classified the messages as 'service non-commercial' or 'compliance' messages. As a result, the messages were treated as DCEMs, which do not have to contain a functional unsubscribe facility when sent. The ACMA further notes that some of the messages included a statement from CBA that the recipient could not unsubscribe.

Conclusion

36. The ACMA is of the view that CBA has contravened subsection 18(1) of the Spam Act on up to 170,678,086 instances between 22 November 2022 and 17 April 2024, as the elements to establish contraventions are met

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Conclusion

- 37. The ACMA finds that there are reasonable grounds to believe that CBA has, between 22 November 2022 and 17 April 2024, contravened:
 - a. subsection 16(1) of the Spam Act on up to 34,859,742 instances by sending commercial electronic messages without consent; and
 - b. subsection 18(1) of the Spam Act on up to 170,678,086 instances by sending commercial electronic messages without a functional unsubscribe facility.

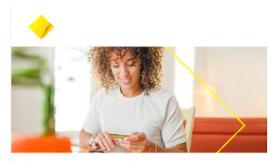
Attachments

Attachment A - example of CBA Surepay CEM

Attachment B – examples of CBA templates

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Attachment A - example CBA Surepay CEM



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Yours sincerely The CommBank Team

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Any interest-free period on purchases will no longer apply once the purchase is put on a plan

You can cancel your SurePay plan at any time. When a cancellation is processed, the outstanding installment balance will be transferred to your purchases balance (or cash advances balance for cancelled cash advance plans) and accrue interest from the transfer date at the standard purchase or cash interest rate applicable on your account.

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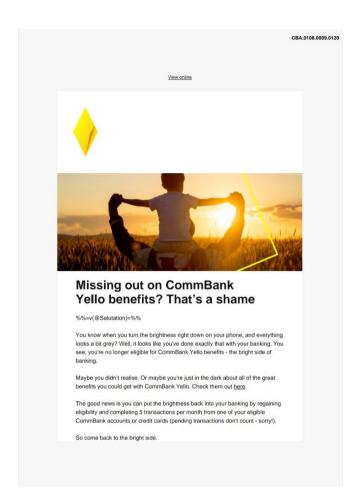
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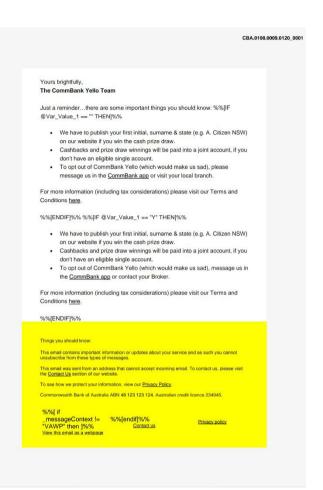
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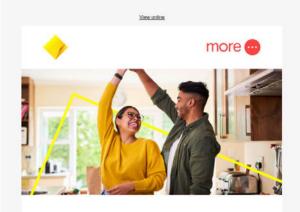
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Attachment B - examples of CBA templates





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The details



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How to activate your free nbn plan

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Claim offer

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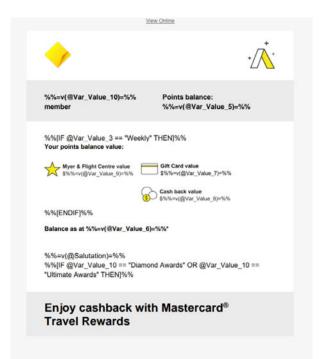
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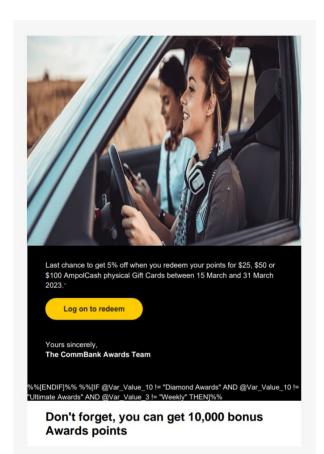
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