



Which? Shorts: Uncovering dodgy broadband brokers

Hello and welcome, I'm Rob Lilley and this is the Which? Shorts podcast.

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In this edition we'll be revealing how customers with internet problems are being duped by dodgy broadband broker adverts on Google.

To read us this article, written by Stephen Maunder, I'll hand you over to Ian Aikman...

If you're working from home and your internet goes down, your first thought will probably be to turn your router off and on again to see if it fixes the problem. If that doesn't work, it's time to contact your provider to report the issue. You pick up your phone and search for your provider's number on Google. A big blue phone number appears at the top of the results and you tap to call it. The problem is, you might not actually be calling your provider at all - and you could end up significantly out of pocket and signed up to a new broadband package you simply didn't need.

When we searched for Sky, BT and TalkTalk helplines on Google, we found that adverts for two companies - named Broadband Services and Phone Internet - routinely appeared at the top of the results page, above the provider's own website. Rather than displaying a link to a website, these adverts featured highlighted phone numbers, the blue ones mentioned earlier. These are called 'click to dial' adverts, and when you tap on the number, your phone is prompted to call it. Broadband Services' ad says you can 'call to discuss your phone and broadband', while Phone Internet's ad says it offers 'UK sales and support'.

Neither of these companies are registered on Companies House, the UK's company register, but both have basic websites. Phone Internet's website says it can find you 'the best home phone and broadband' and 'the lowest ever prices, with the best known providers'. Broadband Services, meanwhile, says it 'provides customers with the best possible service when negotiating their new broadband'. From these blurbs, it's clear that neither is likely to fix your broken internet connection. Phone Internet's website says the company is located in Clitheroe, Lancashire, while Broadband Services claims to be based in New Delhi, India. We asked mystery shoppers to call both companies posing as Sky, BT and TalkTalk customers whose internet had gone down. Despite having different phone numbers and apparently being based in different countries, it became clear that the calls we made to both companies went through to the same organisation: Comms Broker. Comms Broker isn't registered on Companies House. Its website

says it is based in Preston, Lancashire, some 20 miles from Phone Internet and 5,000 miles from Broadband Services.

When our callers pressed Comms Broker on whether it could fix their internet issues, its representatives confirmed it wasn't actually their broadband provider. They then set about trying to sell them a new package, claiming that old equipment was causing their connection issues, or telling them they were paying too much for their current deal. Comms Broker's website says it finds you the 'perfect broadband deal', offering packages from 'some of the UK's most reputable providers'. On every occasion, however, Comms Broker tried to sell our callers an identical package with a provider called Supanet. Representatives were clearly following a script, quoting Supanet's longevity (more than 20 years) and Trust Pilot score (4.7 out of 5).

There's a good chance you haven't heard of Supanet - and if you have, we strongly recommend you avoid this provider. Its packages don't appear on price comparison websites or TV adverts. In fact, you can only sign up over the phone - an antiquated system for a broadband provider in 2022. Two Comms Broker representatives told our callers that Supanet is UK-based, a claim we found to be false. In fact, Supanet is based in Cyprus, and has a chequered past. In 2013, it was fined by the regulator Ofcom for slamming - a process where customers are switched from one company to another without their consent. We've seen more recent complaints about Supanet online, including allegations of mis-selling and failing to adhere to rules on cooling-off periods. There are some high-profile examples. In November 2020, the chef and TV presenter Simon Rimmer accused Supanet of duping his 87-year-old father into taking out a package by claiming it was BT. BT has confirmed to Which? that it has no relationship with Supanet. Six months earlier, the actor Will Mellor published a video where he claimed to have been 'conned' by Supanet. He says he was 'promised the world' on the phone, before finding his new package was sub-par. He says that when he called to cancel, he was told he would need to pay £500.

Which? Member Emma - not her real name - inadvertently called Comms Broker when attempting to sign up for a new package with BT. Emma explained that she phoned a telephone number strategically placed below - and apparently part of - a genuine BT advert.

Emma said: On the phone, Comms Broker claimed to be a comparison company, but despite my naming BT repeatedly, they signed me up to Supanet. In the course of the conversation, however clear you make your wish to join BT, the operator will not tell you that you are signing up with a totally different company. After receiving emails from Supanet about her upcoming broadband installation, Emma quickly tried to cancel her package. She says that Supanet refused, claiming she had answered 'yes' to the operator's question, 'Are you happy for me to sign you up with Supanet?'. Emma was told that she would need to pay a fee of £460 to cancel her package, and was threatened with a debt collection agency. She returned Supanet's router by recorded delivery, changed her bank details so any future payments to Supanet would be blocked, and threatened court action. After this, she never heard from Comms Broker or Supanet again.

When we investigated the relationship between Comms Broker and Supanet, we found some striking coincidences. Comms Broker says it's based at Lockside Office Park in Preston, Lancashire. We can't confirm this, as the company doesn't exist on Companies House. We did, however, find a company called Tpad123, which until last December was registered at the very same address on Companies House, before moving to a new location in Blackburn, 10 miles away. Tpad123 has a clear link to Supanet. It was founded by the same person, is described as a supplier on Supanet's website, and was previously called 'Supanet Support Limited' between 2009 and 2015. We asked Tpad123 if it has links to Comms Broker, but didn't receive a response. We can't confirm that Comms Broker and Supanet are linked, but we do know Comms Broker only sells Supanet packages and that, until recently, it shared an address with a company that was previously called 'Supanet Support'. We also know that it uses two

fake companies - Broadband Services and Phone Internet - for Google advertising to hide its true identity.

We believe that Comms Broker could be breaching Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations by misleading people into believing it offers broadband support and convincing callers they need to switch broadband packages when they don't. When we put these allegations to Comms Broker, it failed to respond. When we contacted Supanet for its side of the story, it simply responded 'nc' - which we're taking to mean 'no comment'. We believe Google should be doing more to identify and verify companies and their claims when it allows them to advertise on its platforms. A Google spokesperson told Which?: 'We don't allow ads or destinations that deceive users by excluding relevant product information or providing misleading information about products, services or businesses. Where we find ads that breach our policies we take action to remove them.' Google confirmed it had removed the ads we raised and said it has begun to verify the identity of all advertisers on its platforms as part of its Business Operations Verification programme.

Our findings underline how important it is to check and double-check before calling a phone number you find online. It can be difficult to spot a dodgy ad, but there are a few steps you can take to protect yourself before making a call:

- Adverts on Google will say the word 'Ad' in the top corner of the search results. To be safe, consider scrolling past anything labelled 'Ad' until you reach the main search results. Never assume that a website or phone number is genuine because it appears at the top of the search results or says 'Ad'.
- Ensure that the URL in the advert belongs to the company you want to speak to (and not a third party) before calling.
- Go to your provider's website directly and find the phone number you need in its 'help' or 'contact us' section.
- If possible, find a letter or other documentation from your provider and source the phone number there rather than searching for it on Google.

Thank you to Ian, and thank you to Stephen Maunder, the journalist behind that original piece of writing.

Remember you can find more articles you'll find useful every day on everything from money and technology to home and garden advice by signing up to one of our many free email newsletters at which.co.uk/newsletters.

We'll be back next week for another episode of Which? Shorts. Thanks for listening.

Which? Shorts was produced by me, Rob Lilley, while the Exec Producer was Angus Farquhar.