



2015 BASICS AWARD FOR INGENUITY AND RESULTS

Presented by the Partnership for Public Service and sponsored by Sheila C. Bair, former chairperson of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation

Confidential: Embargoed until August 13, 2015

Finalist: Tammi Marcoullier, General Services Administration; Roberto Anguizola and Kathleen Daffan, Federal Trade Commission

Achievement: Generated new technical tools to stop a growing number of unsolicited and illegal telemarketing robocalls using the Federal Trade Commission's first nationwide crowdsourcing prize competition

The Federal Trade Commission receives more than two million complaints a year regarding robocalls, those often unwanted and deceptive telemarketing solicitations. While the FTC has shut down some of the companies engaging in fraudulent conduct, it had been unable to find a technological solution to successfully attack what has become a growing and troublesome nationwide problem.

This dilemma led a group of three *Excellence in Government* Senior Fellows representing the FTC and General Services Administration to join together and develop a crowdsourcing competition through the federal Challenge.gov platform. The purpose of this first-ever FTC public challenge was to tap into the technical expertise of the private sector to come up with innovative ideas and stimulate the marketplace to develop new products that will block unwanted and illegal robocalls.

"The FTC receives hundreds of thousands of complaints per month about robocalls and can prosecute violators, but technology has been taking off faster than the FTC can keep up," said Tammi Marcoullier, an EIG Senior Fellow and the program manager for Challenge.gov at GSA. "They didn't have the staff, funding or collective skillset to solve this problem."

Two other EIG Senior Fellows, Roberto Anguizola, an FTC lawyer who handles consumer complaints, and Kathleen Daffan, an attorney advisor to the FTC chairwoman, were on a small FTC team working on ways to address the robocall problem. They reached out to Marcoullier for advice on designing their challenge and prize policies, assisting with pitching the concept to agency staff, and help using the Challenge.gov platform.

The team navigated many internal hurdles at the FTC and GSA, and effectively marketed the challenge to a broad nationwide audience, including entrepreneurs, developers and different high-tech communities to generate interest.

The nationwide "Robocall Challenge," conducted between October 2012 and January 2013, received 798 eligible submissions from the public—a huge response that included original technical solutions, policy proposals and consumer tips.

The \$50,000 in prize money was split between Aaron Foss, a freelance software developer, and Serdar Danis, a computer engineer, who separately built systems that the FTC said "focus on

intercepting and filtering out illegal prerecorded calls using technology to 'blacklist' robocaller phone numbers and 'whitelist' numbers associated with acceptable incoming calls." The system built by Foss, known as Nomorobo, is now accessible for free through a simple online registration, has more than 86,000 users and has blocked more than 26 million landline calls to date.

The FTC also honored two Google employees for devising a robocall identification and blocking system. They did not receive a financial prize because none was offered for proposals from large businesses, but the system is available for those who use Google Voice.

Using challenge submissions, the FTC developed educational videos with tips to help individuals stop harassing robocalls. The positive experience of the first challenge led the FTC to launch three more robocall competitions. One pending contest is challenging the public to develop information systems that may be used by government, as well as private and academic partners, to lure and analyze robocalls.

Cristin Dorgelo, the chief of staff for the White House Office and Science Technology Policy, said the three *Excellence in Government* Senior Fellows did a great job getting word out to the public and developer communities about the robocall challenge, and it turned out to be "a particularly effective competition" that should pay big dividends.

The FTC Robocall Challenge Series has already assisted tens of thousands of citizens, and will potentially help millions of people as it grows to include future detection and prevention methods.

"They ended up getting a really broad array of solutions," said Dorgelo.