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Emergency number unknown in Europe

by Perro de Jong*

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The 112 emergency number is gaining ground, but not very rapidly. Compared with last year, the number of Europeans who know about it has risen by two percent.

Tjerk Terpstra, the Dutch 'Mr 112', says there is a lack of awareness because many countries operate two different emergency numbers; 112 for tourists as well as the number they usually use. In the United Kingdom, for example, this is 999.

If a British person abroad crashes their car into a tree, their first instinct will be to dial 999, says Mr Terpstra. "First of all you panic; you only think about it afterwards."

Campaign song

The Netherlands is one of the countries that has replaced its old alarm number with 112, so virtually the entire population now knows about it. But only a third are aware that you can also use it in other European countries.

Mr Terpstra therefore thinks publicity is important. Last year he received one of the first '112 Awards' for the new emergency call centre in the village of Driebergen, near Utrecht. According to Brussels, it is the best in Europe.

This year, in addition to extra awards, there is even a special '112 Anthem' created by Armenian-born Belgian singer Nara Noïan (*listen to the video below*). The idea is that each country should organise its own festivities, although up to now only Finland appears to be doing so. But is any of this actually helping?



'Trouser-pocket callers'

Tjerk Terpstra thinks it would be more effective to organise a good information campaign every year. In fact, this is something all EU member countries are supposed to do.

He does think however, that the 112 Awards are a good way to motivate the people working behind the scenes. Their job can often be frustrating. All over Europe, from Turkey to Finland and from Ireland to Poland, the majority of 112 emergency calls made turn out not to relate to real emergencies.

They vary from innocent 'trouser-pocket callers', to heavy breathers and second-hand mobile phone dealers who dial 112 to show that a phone works without needing a SIM card.

Going bilingual

"I have a lot of respect for emergency phone operators who have to deal with endless prank calls for anything up to half an hour on end," Mr Terpstra says. Yet, he still believes that blocking emergency calls, as is done in a number of European countries, takes things one step too far. In the Netherlands 40,000 real emergency calls come in every year via pre-paid mobile phones, often from the elderly.

In the meantime, Brussels is now targeting a different problem: language. According to the latest European research, 28 percent of Europeans have difficulties using 112 because of the language barrier. Ideally, the European Commission would therefore like to see a small army of translators at the ready to handle calls in all of the EU's official languages.

Yet this is also not necessarily the answer, believes Mr Terpstra, who currently advises the European Emergency Number Association. English, French and German are enough. "Only sometimes you have one of those Polish or Bulgarian truck drivers who only knows the odd word in German. That's a problem, of course."

*RNW translation (MB)

[The European 112 campaign:](#)

Tags: 112, ambulance, dialling, emergency, Europe, number, phone



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Reaction(s):

Vera Gottlieb, 12-02-2009 - Germany

Why not introduce the "911" North America uses? This way, no matter where you are, the emergency number is the same.

David Berridge, 12-02-2009 - Canada

There is also one other explanation not given, which is perhaps that the 911 number in North America has been so popularized in global media that 112 is harder to keep in mind. Just think of Homer Simpson reacting in a crisis trying to remember what the number for 911 is. Europe needs a joke like that for 112!

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