

Let's talk about text, baby...

 By [Desere Orrill](#)

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Given that mobile penetration rates in SA are higher than any other medium, mobile communication is undoubtedly one of the best ways to reach the widest audience. Text messaging is quick, easy, affordable, direct, personal and universally accessible on all phone types from candy-bar phones produced in the 90s to the latest tablets and smartphones. Of the total of around 45million cell phones in SA today, as at the end of June approximately 14 million of those were smartphones.

Across this wide array of devices and operating systems, the text message forms part of an interactive process in which marketers can engage with consumers directly. Gone are the days where the audience obligingly "received" the marketing message that was broadcast by the advertiser. Today even the most sophisticated marketing campaign needs a feedback channel, because the consumer wants to be part of the conversation. Mobile messaging is the ideal vehicle to meet this requirement, as long as the communication is permission based.

Make sure that you are welcome

The plethora of (despised) text messages offering personal loans or cheaper insurance to people who have never engaged with the sender and don't fit the target market, have to a large extent been exorcised from the mobile messaging landscape through the Consumer Protection Act. Thank goodness.

This means that serious marketers who have a relevant and transparent message for potential clients who wish to engage with their brand and who "opt-in" to the conversation, can make maximum use of this ubiquitous marketing channel to connect with customers and grow their businesses by building relationships, boosting loyalty and providing an easy method for positive referrals.

Always add value - avoid "opt-out"

All that said, don't be fooled into thinking that it's as easy as 'plug-and-play': marketers still have to make sure that their message is effective.

Having gone through the process of gaining their confidence and permission to converse with their clients, unfortunately some brands fail to provide their recipients with messages that are perceived as valuable. As a result, the hard earned privilege of communicating directly with their customer base is lost when the client opts-out of the communication process.

Clients need to feel that the communication offers a benefit or reward, be this actual (discounts or special offers), in the form of entertainment (an interesting fact or quirky story), or informative (news to use).

Ask questions, listen

Once an opt-in database has been established - don't stop there. Find out more about your clients by asking about their interests, personal preferences and motivations, and use text messaging to refine your customer segmentation. By obtaining personal and relevant information, brands get to know what their customers really want and communication can be targeted accordingly, thus hugely reducing the chance that messaging could be unwelcome or intrusive.

On time, on target

The beauty of text messaging is that it can be implemented at times when the recipient is most receptive to the message and more likely to react in the desired way. For example, promoting coffee specials? Remind your target market between 7am and 8am. Super-duper lunchtime special? Send an SMS to your customers at around noon.

Text messages can also be used to prompt action on regular activities at certain times of the month or year, such as bill payment reminders, doctors' appointments, motor vehicle services, and so on. A unique service for chronic illness sufferers is a useful daily reminder to take their medication - patients can even select the time slots during which they want to receive their messages.

(For a more sophisticated approach, smartphones allow for geotargeting and messages can be delivered when clients are within a specific geographic range - but that is a topic for another day.)

Be respectful

The key element in all these engagements is that the recipient has a say in the experience: firstly by consenting to receive messages, then by being able to engage in conversation with the sender and thus having an influence on the messaging process (content, timing). It is up to the brand or message sender to maintain the integrity of the relationship by respecting the recipients' privacy, sending only relevant messages, and regularly reinforcing the relationship with content that is valuable (engaging, entertaining, rewarding).

So many choices - off the shelf or customised

Mobile subscription services are key engagement drivers in South Africa and other emerging markets, and - somewhat surprisingly, given the high penetration of smartphones and related applications - seem to have retained some appeal in more sophisticated markets such as the UK, too.

The more popular services include news headlines, sports alerts, weather or traffic updates, daily jokes, horoscopes or other inspirational messages. Mobile operators or independent content service providers offer these services as paid subscriptions and users can subscribe to receive the selected range of messages as premium rated SMSs.

Brands or organisations can also use the model to communicate with their clients by offering the content to opted-in customers, free of charge. In this instance the brand has the opportunity to create bespoke or customised content which adds value to the recipient but reinforces the brand message as sender.

Be creative, be mindful

Text messages can also include links to audiovisual clips, enabling brands to deliver a multi-media experience to their customer base. In addition to the creation of effective, impactful messages and content delivered at appropriate times, effective mobile marketing should also include practical aspects such as regular database maintenance, and strict adherence to industry norms and regulations.

Marketers should thus take care in selecting their mobile messaging partners, and make sure the mobile agency not only delivers creative and effective content solutions, but also has billing interfaces with all major networks, is an accredited

member of industry bodies and renders a service that meets regulatory requirements.

ABOUT DESERE ORRILL

Deseré Orrill is a co-founder of the Ole! Media Group and is currently the group CMO as well as managing director of MbbiMedia, a mobile engagement company within the group, and HoneyKome, the strategic digital consulting arm of OMG. She is intrigued by the way in which digital communication is redefining the relationship between brand and consumer, and how mobile in particular has become the catalyst for changing the traditional marketing monologue into a conversation.

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