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SMS messaging gets to work

SMS, the happy accident of mobile technology that turns 17 this year, shows no sign of slowing down. In fact, maintains Pieter Streicher, managing director of BulkSMS.com, if anything, SMS is going to accelerate its stellar trajectory thanks to increased business adoption.

Figures released recently by mobile maven Tomi Ahonen show that SMS is the most widely used data application on the planet, with 53% of the total world's population and 78% of the world's mobile phone users texting. Even in the USA, which was famously late to the SMS game, more than two-thirds of Americans send text messages. If you look at the number of users, SMS eclipses email by 2.6 times, despite email having been around for 39 years.

And all over the world, people increasingly prefer to send SMS messages than to make voice calls. Back in 2007, JD Powers reported the first ever decrease in number of voice calls had taken place in the UK while the number of text messages continued to grow. In 2009 Lightspeed Research reported that 11% of mobile phone users surveyed in the UK don't initiate voice calls at all, but do send texts. In the US this number is 13%.

There is a range of reasons for this shift, and Streicher argues that one of them is that in this day and age of information overload, SMS is simply better suited to the way we want to communicate, and be communicated with.

Unlike with landlines in previous generations, we aren't as compelled to answer a mobile phone and are happy to let a call go to voicemail, especially with call volumes increasing. But voicemail is problematic – we don't always pick them up immediately, it's not always convenient to take down phone numbers, and sometimes details get garbled. Indeed, the younger generation often switch off voicemail all together.

Compare this to SMS. It's a simple matter to quickly skim text messages and it can be done very discreetly. All the details are there and can be used immediately or saved for future reference. A 160 Characters study showed that we respond to text messages in five minutes, while we take up to 24 hours to reply to email.

So it seems to make sense that if you are arranging a meet-up with a friend, you'll text her, the message will get to her even if she is otherwise occupied, she'll reply as soon as she is able to, and the message will get back to you whether or not you are available at the same time. SMS makes this type of asynchronous communication incredibly interactive and effective, even though it is not strictly taking place in real time.

Increasingly we are seeing this type of asynchronous communication being adopted by businesses. And it's not only for marketing messages but for day-to-day business communications to customers. This is demonstrated by BulkSMS's own traffic reports, which show an increase in single SMS messages from companies rather than bulk send-outs. If you need to reach a client, you could make multiple phone calls until you get hold of them, or you could send a single SMS, to be read as soon as the customer is able to.



More and more people are refusing to answer calls that come up as a “private number” because they have been the victims of too many unsolicited marketing calls. But if your company uses a least cost router that doesn’t display an outgoing number, your legitimate calls may also be ignored. Provided an SMS is sent with clear details in the message identifying the sender, and provided your company has a track record of using messaging responsibly, your message is unlikely to be ignored.

In addition, the stats quoted in this article show very clearly that Jane and Joe Soap prefer to communicate via SMS. So it’s madness to try to force them to communicate with your company in a different way to their choosing, especially if it’s a customer services issue.

And SMS isn’t just playing a role in customer-facing communication. The Mobile Data Association, quoted by Ahonen, reports that UK executives receive as many as 40 work-related text messages daily, and considers SMS to be their most valuable time management tool.

Business communication is going to lag consumer behaviour. But modern managers and businesses see the value and necessity of this type of communication – and this will further drive the already rapid growth of SMS.