

MEDIA RELEASE

BULKSMS.COM

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Is SMS messaging replacing voicemail?

The recent addition of Vodacom's Voicemail2SMS service in the local mobile market begs the question: is this an indication that SMS is replacing voicemail as a preferred messaging service in South Africa?

"While it may be too early to tell, and may need a broad survey of cellphone users to verify the trend, I do feel the question is important as it points to changes in cellphone user behaviour," says Dr Pieter Streicher, managing director of BulkSMS.com, a global mobile messaging firm headquartered in Cape Town.

Voicemail2SMS, launched earlier this year and supported by Spinvox, converts a voicemail message into an SMS message for Vodacom contract holders at a fixed monthly subscription fee. The Vodacom service transcribes English language voicemails to SMS. In addition, the service is promoted as allowing customers travelling internationally to receive an SMS generated from the Voicemail2SMS service rather than listening, and paying roaming rates, for a voicemail call.

"From a messaging perspective," according to Dr Streicher, "Voicemail2SMS is a vote of confidence in the convenience of SMS messaging. It is easier to read and access contact details via SMS than calling Vodacom's 121 number to retrieve voicemail messages – and then still have to transcribe contact details."

Cellphone usage

The Voicemail2SMS service has had mixed reactions among cellphone users who post to MyBroadband's forums.

One of the reasons offered was that the service did not convert voice messages clearly into a text message and so still requires listening to the original voice message for clarification. Other reasons were that it did not automatically delete voicemails and had a cost implication as an additional cellular service.

There could be one of various reasons for younger cellphone users to shy away from voicemail. Many are pre-paid users who do not like to waste their airtime by leaving a voicemail. They find SMS a cheaper and more efficient communications medium.

This rationale could similarly apply to price-sensitive low income consumers who see airtime as a scarce communications resource.

The same cannot be said of users with cellphone contracts, and free voicemail facilities, who rely on their cellphone for all their business and personal communications. These users are familiar with receiving and leaving voicemails.

"Yet, even among these users there are grumbles that they would prefer to get an SMS rather than listen to a voicemail message. A growing number of voicemail greetings I hear ask callers to 'rather send an SMS' than leave a voice message," observes Dr Streicher. Many people do not even set up their phone's voicemail box on purpose, forcing callers to sms them when they are not available.

"This leaves us to wait and see how the cellphone market responds to Vodacom's new service. While MTN and Cell C have a missed call SMS notification service, only MTN has a product that somewhat approximates Vodacom's Voicemail2SMS service as part of its i-Mail services."

The case for SMS messaging

In all, shifting the emphasis to receiving SMS instead of voice messages is a move that promotes efficient and effective communications, especially in the business environment.

In Dr Streicher's view, "It will always be better if an SMS was sent in the first place so that a recipient may benefit from the advantages of a succinct message and not take the time to delete a now unnecessary voicemail."

Voicemail disadvantages

- Voicemails are less likely to be listened to as soon as they are received, and may only be accessed some time later.
- If the caller left a voice message while in a noisy environment the recipient may find it difficult to make out the message. Similarly if the recipient is in a noisy environment, they may also struggle to hear the message.
- One of the downsides of a voicemail-to-SMS service is that it relies on messages being dictated in "proper" English. Occasionally, mistakes in translation will occur.
- Several voicemails have to be listened to sequentially, resulting in delays picking up voice messages.
- Mobile users are not always in a position to write down details or do not carry notepads, resulting in them having to save messages and re-listen to these later.

Advantages of SMS over voicemail

- It is simply a lot faster to scan through several SMS's, compared to listening to many voicemails.
- With an SMS the relevant details are already visually presented, making it easy to write down information or, if phone has the capability, to save or call the number directly.
- SMS can be stored and saved for later reference.
- SMS is more likely to be read and acted on as soon as it is received.

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About BulkSMS.com

BulkSMS.com, a division of Celerity Systems (Pty) Ltd, has been in operation since 2000 and is headquartered in Cape Town, South Africa. BulkSMS is a leading wireless application service provider offering bulk SMS messaging solutions to large and small businesses, public benefit organisations, and individuals. BulkSMS.com has a global market presence, including Europe, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. To further an organisation's SMS communication needs, BulkSMS offers two-way bulk SMS messaging, premium rate solutions and supports mobile marketing campaigns. BulkSMS flagship messaging solution is the BulkSMS Text Messenger, a desktop application. BulkSMS is a member of the Wireless Application Service Provider Association (WASPA).

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