Txtm8: An introduction to the effective use of SMS

Ruth Staple - South West Arts Marketing

This presentation offered an introduction to text message marketing using, as a case study, the Txtm8 project.

The mobile phone industry has seen rapid growth in recent years and, although 78% of UK homes claimed to have at least one mobile phone in May 2001[1], forecasts predict that the market is still growing. Over two hundred countries now have mobile networks and, in Western Europe, SMS and mobile phones are considered to be the primary peer-to-peer communication method of choice for under 25s, having replaced the internet and chat rooms. This year 55 million SMS messages were sent *every day* during May compared to 45 million in May last year.[2] That's a growth of 22% and almost one message for every member of the population.

In a recent *Guardian* article a report was quoted which suggested the age profile of SMS users was changing as more people over twenty-five, and even people in their fifties and sixties, were becoming comfortable with SMS. This has been aided particularly by the ability to send text messages from a pc, which is more acceptable to older people who can't be bothered to fiddle around with the handsets.

SMS communications are mostly peer-to-peer but this year 7% of the messages sent were made by companies. A new report (Frost & Sullivan) predicts that texting will account for 10% of all mobile phone companies income by 2006.

I'd like to have a look at what the 55 million daily messages are being used for.

- Updates. These are services we sign up to such as weather reports, stock market updates and sport results. Maybe you'd like to know the results of Manchester United's latest match or updates all on the latest stages of the Tour de France. But if your mind is on higher things than Lance Armstrong's thighs you may wish to receive a contemplative thought for the day that is currently offered by both Christian and Islamic organisations.
- Voting. Despite this year's *Big Brother* being declared a flop, it still manages to secure four million votes at eviction time. On a more serious note, voters in Liverpool and Sheffield were able to cast their vote by text in the local elections in May this year. This innovation was unveiled by the electoral reform society to "boost the proportion of people who bother to vote in local elections" with security measures in place to ensure you cannot vote more than once.
- Greetings Cards. First there were greetings cards on the Internet. These are perfect if you have forgotten your mother's birthday, assuming of course that she has email. Now there are SMS picture greetings which take even less time to organise and can be sent direct to your celebrating parent. Lessons from my own experience include ensuring your mother's phone can receive picture messages, and reminding her to turn it on.

---

[1] Oftel 2001
[2] Mobile Data

- Dating. At the conference last year we heard from Adam Joinson who suggested people choose their communication method when asking for dates according to how successful they think they are going to be – face to face if they are confident, and by email or SMS if not. Mobile dating services are proving to be amongst the most profitable services for mobile operators. Although the majority of users are under 25, more than 50% of the revenue for these services came from the over 25's, with the over 30's representing the most profitable user group.

- Airlines. On July 7th both Paris airports launched an SMS service allowing passengers to check out flight information. By sending a text message with their flight number they can receive arrival and departure time, terminal, gate and baggage claim belt number. Another useful service might be to alert unsuspecting passengers to airport personnel strikes. Qantas will now provide passengers, including economy class, with handsets allowing them to text safely, and several leading American airlines have also relaxed the restrictions on texting during a flight.

- Education. Given the high numbers of children with mobile phones (25% of children aged between 6 and 13) schools are seeing both the advantages and disadvantages of text within the education system. A new scheme in Yorkshire will text parents of truanting children to tell them that their kids have skipped school again while other ideas consider sending revision tips to people studying for exams, and encouraging chat between schools. However some schools are installing scanners that sound an alert when a mobile phone is used to stop pupils texting each other with the answers during exams. So far this year 254 pupils have had their exam results disqualified.

- Location. The child rescue alert system also had its first run when 6-year-old Summer Haipule went missing. Police sent messages to alert people of the possibility of an abduction. Unfortunately in this case the alerts didn't work as the contract the police had with their service provider had run out.

- Hot Lines. There are different examples of 'hot lines' being used, many of which are crime related, but my favourite is one in the Philippines called Text the Pusher, Save the User. This scheme encourages people to report illegal drug activities. Bizarrely, this has spawned a new idea called Snifferdog.com which invites residents to sign up for SMS tip offs warning them of the location of dog teams used to crack down on drugs and illegal handguns.

- Clubbing. Anyone who has been to a club recently will have noticed how many people send texts whilst on the dance-floor. This may be to let people who aren't there know what a good time they are missing, but often the texts are to other clubbers as it is too loud to hear each other talk. Neo One have now developed a huge screen which allows clubbers to chat with each other. This is a great idea if you've lost a friend in the crowd but I'm not sure I'd be happy about letting everyone else see my messages if I was trying to chat someone up.

- Porn. A British "newspaper" has developed a business that sends adult content to mobile phone owners, by-passing the standard carrier sales channel. By texting "go thesport" Bang go.net redirects people to a porn site thus avoiding breaking the law by sending indecent publications by post.

In all these cases, there are a number of benefits of SMS as a communication tool. Firstly, receivers can be guaranteed to "get the message". It's hard to ignore a text message when it arrives, and they cannot be deleted without first being opened. Messages can be extremely reactive to events and sent with only a minutes notice 24 hours a day. Assuming that phones are switched on messages are usually received within two minutes of sending them.

The Txtm8 project was funded by a £15k DCMS New Audiences grant, awarded via Arts Council England, South West. There is an assumption that many young people go out for the night without a clear destination or activity in mind other than being with friends. Txtm8 aimed to test this utilising the benefits of SMS whilst offering a mixture of instantly promoted special offers. The project began in March last year and was initially scheduled to finish in September. However, since this meant the bulk of the activity would take place when Plymouth's large student population would be absent, the project was extended until October, allowing us to test the premise on the returning student population.

The txtm8 project sought to market a range of events in Plymouth to 18-24 year olds using SMS technology, working with a range of arts and leisure organisations throughout the city. I know you are thinking "Oh no, not another audience development project aimed at young people", but given the research available on text messaging at the beginning of the project this seemed the obvious age group to test the technology.

Plymouth City Council contacted suitable arts and leisure organisations inviting them to a meeting to find out more, and from that meeting we set up a steering group of seven which represented the range of organisations involved. It comprised the Theatre Royal, Barbican Theatre, Plymouth Arts Centre, 24-7, South West Arts Marketing, Plymouth City Council and Plymouth Musicians Cooperative. As the project progressed further organisations asked to be included, notably Plymouth Pavilions, several commercial clubs and jazz bars. The main incentives for the organisations taking part were:

- To sell unsold capacity;
- To test SMS technology without having to fund it from their own budgets;
- To increase awareness of their organisation to a target age group that is notoriously difficult for the arts to communicate with;
- To own a database of contacts in the target age group.

The Phone Room was identified as a suitable partner to handle the mobile polling and after considerable discussion, and some seriously dodgy suggestions, we decided to call the project: Txtm8 – the free text service that keeps you in the now :)

The steering group worked with designers from 24-7, the local style magazine for 18-25 year olds, who were used to communicating with this age group and who also developed our website. I have to admit that when I first saw the print design I said, "oh, it's not very 'arty' is it?", to which the designers answered "exactly".   I'm pleased to say it was very effective.

Despite the existence of several companies who managed databases of the target age group, including one with 150 names from the right postcode area, we decided to build our own database from scratch, hoping that we could match the 150 names, and perhaps achieve a target of 300. Our priorities included a simple but effective data collection system and the ability to segment by age and interest. The data fields we decided were most important to us were: name, phone number, email address, age and postcode. We also asked people to state which of the following they were interested in: Cinema, Clubbing, Comedy, Dance, Digital visual arts, theatre and live music. We were keen to differentiate "dance" and "clubbing" to

avoid confusion: in one report when non-attenders were asked why they don't go to dance events they replied that it was because "they were too dangerous".

Below the data capture fields is a sentence which makes it explicit as to why we are collecting data and what we were going to do with it. The cards were distributed throughout the city and in a full-page advert in 24/7. One of six discreet numbers on the card allows us to monitor where they were picked up as we had six separate codes. Cards were returned to a Plymouth Freepost address to maximise the numbers being completed. People could also register via the Txtm8 website www.txtm8.info and could unsubscribe at any time. People registering were automatically entered into a competition to win one of two Nokia 5510 mobile phones, or one of 50 £10 top up vouchers. Once registered, members received text and email messages thanking them for registering, and suggesting that they pass the message on to their txtm8's

The project was launched by DJ's and bands playing at a prime site in Plymouth City Centre's busy shopping area on a Saturday morning as individuals wearing bright yellow branded t-shirts handed out cards inviting people to sign up. The printing and launch costs amounted to £3k, or 20% of the total budget

The technology was extremely user friendly. Messages were sent via a website, so users only needed an internet connection and a password. Initially I sent out all the messages but it wasn't long before organisations were happy to do it for themselves. The website allowed users to send text messages, emails or both. Sometimes we sent a short SMS message *and* a longer complimentary email including a link to a companies' website. All of the emails we sent during the project were free of charge. Operators

could also choose whether to send their messages to everyone, selected individuals, groups, or a combination of groups e.g. 35-44 year old live music attenders for the Paul Weller competition.

There was only one limitation. Messages could not be stored and sent out later at a particular time, so if a club wanted to send a message at 10pm I had to stay at home and send it, but I understand this has now been resolved. The system was very responsive. From typing in a message and pressing send on the website, to someone receiving it, typically took 10 seconds to a minute, assuming their phone was turned on. During the seven months of the project we sent out over 10,000 text messages, plus emails.

The first thing we did was to establish an anti-clash diary showing when organisations wanted to send messages, which audience segments they were targeting and what kind of offer they were sending, as we didn't want to swamp users with messages. We also realised that as our promotional material described us as a 'free text service' we had to be an information service as well as sending out special offers.

So how did we test the technology? Here are a few examples.

- Across art form, by promoting an art form to a different interest group. "*Catwalk*" was a performance at the Theatre Royal with a strong club soundtrack and a late night show on a Friday. We contacted the clubbing audience at 6pm on Friday evening offering free tickets if they showed "the phone message" to the Box Office. We also promoted a film called *"Biggie & Tupac"* about two American rappers showing at the local arts cinema to the clubbing audience.
- Timed messages. We sent the same message at different times to alphabetically selected sections of the database and monitored the response rates to identify the best times to send messages.
- A wide variety of promotions and discounted tickets were offered at all of the participating organisations from theatre tickets, tickets to see bands (notably Toploader, Morcheeba and Paul Weller) free drinks at nightclubs, and reduced price entry to films.
- Teaser campaigns. We sent a variety of messages leading up to an event. We were delighted that Destiny nightclub allowed us to send teaser messages for a Judge Jules night for which there would be no advance sales.
- This linked to the queue jumping as we then sent message on the night of the event that allowed Txtm8's to jump the queue.
- Developing audiences. We offering existing mainstream cinema audiences discounted tickets to see foreign films, and promoted new events at the Barbican theatre to existing audiences e.g. dance classes to dance performance attenders.
- Textback. This is where we asked recipients of messages to text back to win competitions or qualify for free tickets or offers.

All competition winners were notified of their win via text messages and members whose emails were bounced back as incorrect were asked to confirm their address by text. We also kept the mobile phone numbers of people taking up the offers, allowing us to profile them from our database, but also acting as a security mechanism. Organisations offering discounted tickets were able to claim back the discount from our budget and we were able to make sure they weren't claiming for non-existent punters as we had to be entirely accountable to the DCMS for the money spent.

All competition winners were sent evaluation forms and a pre-paid envelope with their prizes. Encouragingly 54 were returned and all the comments were extremely positive. 100% wanted the scheme to continue, although this could of course have been because they had won something. In October scheme members in the target age range were sent text messages asking them to participate in phone questionnaires. As a result 19 more detailed responses were obtained with similarly promising results to the postal surveys.

So what were the main outcomes of Txtm8? At the end of the project, and once duplicate users had been removed, 826 people had signed up. Only 6 people had unsubscribed from the service. 525 email addresses were also captured, although a small proportion of these were found to be unusable, as people had filled them in incorrectly. Always ask people to print their email addresses.

We were aiming our promotion and branding at 18-24 year olds, and this accounted for 40% of participants, with almost another 40% form the age groups on either side (15-17 and 25-34). The most popular method of registering was online. One of the findings that surprised us the most was that 51% of those signing up to the scheme were men, and that people taking up the offers were split equally by gender. This certainly aroused considerable interest as a possible way of increasing the awareness of the arts among young men. We also noted that when we mapped the audience against known regular arts attenders in Plymouth we were reaching a very different audience – ACORN classifications of students, bedsits, and young professionals.

And what about the results of out different ways of testing the technology?

- The "*Catwalk*" offer at the Theatre Royal created a 5% response rate which included people who were new to the Theatre Royal's Database. "*Biggie & Tupac*" enticed a 2% response rate, all of who were new to the Arts cinema.
- Changing the timing of the messages revealed that early evening, about 6pm, was definitely the best time to send texts across all of the age groups. The day made a difference to younger people as they were "out of money" after the weekend.
- The promotions and discounted tickets varied in response rate from 0-16% and were higher if the target audience was well matched to the offer.
- The teaser campaign for Judge Jules certainly elicited a response from the clubbing audience, and quite a few people tried jumping the queue. The bad news was that despite the offer being agreed with all parties well in advance, the club had such an overwhelming response on the night they decided not to bother without telling us. We had to send everyone apologetic text messages, but the good news is that we were able to respond quickly and knew everyone who was sent the message would read it. Post project evaluation suggests that this didn't damage the brand or prevent people from trusting our offers.
- The response to the message aimed at developing audiences were lower than other promotional offers and were typically between 1 and 3%.
- Once we had the textback facility the response rate to offers and promotions leaped to 16-20%. Most responses were received within 5 minutes of the message being sent out and most were received from the target age segment.

So, after spending the £15k from the DCMS did we think we had learned anything about using SMS to attract people to the arts?

- Working with a range of organisations meant each organisation was able to benefit from the trust in a range of brands.
- Post project evaluation showed that people receiving Txtm8 branded messages trusted them. Messages offering information and promotional offers about their favourite clubs or bars meant they also read and trusted the messages they received from theatres and arts centres.
- Arts organisations gained from the success and experience of the non-arts sector working with young people.
- The print was not what we considered to be "traditional arts print" but the fact that over 800 people signed up to the service suggests that it worked.
- Working as a group to brainstorm ideas also freed us from typical constraints.
- "By offering a wide variety of information from several organisations we were able to reach people who would usually switch off as soon as they heard the word theatre." (Participating venue)
- SMS is not only for young people. Although our print was aimed at 18-25 year olds 33% of people signing up were over 25.
- "My little cousin, my mum and my grandparents all use text" (post project evaluation interview). The barriers that older people feel about using SMS are helping to be alleviated by the services offering pc to mobile phone communications.
- As with more conventional communication methods, such as direct mail, the language and timing of the message were key. Because of the nature of the technology both had to be considered even more carefully: texts allow a maximum of 160 characters for Latin alphabets, and 70 for Chinese or Arabic alphabets, in which we had to get over our branding, make the offer and include a response mechanism. The "*little book of text messaging*" helped with the commonly used abbreviations, but the Barbican Theatre had a better idea: they asked members of their youth theatre group to come up with the wording for their messages. All of the issues associated with the timing of messages such as direct mail and brochures apply but with radically different timescales. Rather than worrying about whether to send them first or second class to arrive next Tuesday we were talking about sending them during lunch-hours, school breaks or at about 6pm when people were sat in the pub deciding what to do for the evening.
- Participating organisations need to be committed and see the benefits of the project to ensure best results. The organisations who took part committed a great deal of time and effort to this project because they could see exactly what was in it for them; they were included at every stage of the process and they had an independent organisation to run the project so they all saw themselves as equal partners.
- SMS built the awareness of arts organisations with people who did not respond to traditional arts marketing methods. Questionnaires showed that, although most of the respondents did not consider themselves to be arts attenders, they could remember the names of the arts organisations who had sent them messages as well as the names of the bars and clubs. Post project questionnaires showed that 53% of respondents were visiting an arts venue for the first time because of a text message they

had received, and 42% were visiting a new type of event because of a text message they had received. Almost all of the respondents did not consider themselves to be arts attenders.

- Using SMS can affect how people view your organisation or even your city. Certainly Plymouth City Council were delighted with what they thought using SMS said about both the arts in Plymouth and Plymouth as a city.
- SMS cannot sell unwanted tickets but it can turn intenders into attenders: "I'd seen the Barbican Theatre before but not been inside" (Post project evaluation interview). People today are very media savvy, particularly this age group, and they easily see through the special offer that is trying to sell the un-sellable. But post project evaluation included a lot of comments from the Intenders group who had subsequently visited a venue that was new to them. In one case the respondent had even saved the venue's box office number straight to her phone address book.

So what's in store for Txtm8? After the project had finished we received several emails from members asking when it would be coming back as they were missing the service. I'm delighted to say that the organisations that took part have decided to keep the brand going and pay for it themselves. I think that counts as a success. As the technology becomes more prevalent it will be interesting to see whether the younger male "Innovators" become less attracted by SMS in favour of whatever replaces it and, as it becomes more acceptable to older age groups, it will be interesting to test the technology with older audiences who are also new to the arts.

So, could we have achieved the same results using our £15k DCMS money in another way? A criticism frequently levelled at audience development projects is that the same results would have been achieved if money had been given to people on the street to attend arts events. Could we have got 800 people to sign up to the scheme if we had given them each £19? I expect so, as this age group are very money conscious. Let's make it harder: what if we'd given 100 people £150 to attend an event, could we have managed the same results? Of course, but what we wouldn't have achieved was the trusted brand, the brand that was missed once the project had finished. We would also have annoyed the friends of those taking part who didn't get £150, whereas SMS actively encourages viral marketing and we asked people to pass the message on to build the scheme, and we wouldn't have built the awareness of arts venues in the city with a group who were, by their own admission, not really in to the arts.

To summarise the key points to consider when thinking about using text:

- Language and timing, as with all other communicating methods, are key, and we have to be even more focused.
- When asking for data be explicit about why you are asking for it, what you will do with the data, and ask people's permission. This minimises the chances that you will damage the brand by sending unwelcome messages.
- Ensure that SMS is just one of your communication tools and is built into your campaign rather than being an "add on".

SMS isn't suitable to use for every target audience segment or even every product, but when the two are well matched, and the above points are taken into consideration, it can be very effective.

****

For further information on this project you can read a full report on the South West Arts Marketing website:

http://www.swam.org.uk/projects.asp