

Getting the message home

The rise of text-marketing

It is now known that the market for more mobile phone ring tones is greater than that for CD Just how far can this personal communications technology go and what might be the impact our day-to-day marketing implementation?

YOU'VE GOT MY NUMBER...

The real genesis of this techno-revolution lies in the visionary understanding by Vodafone that the future of communications was not in managing them from a residence or land location but in associating a communications "ID number" with the individual. Overnight, this opened up the potential for a truly massive expansion in personal communications: the novelty of having a multitelecom lined home is outmoded by the market potential of having a communications port for every citizen in your target sector.

The rest is history: we're now in a world where mobiles are as much a part of the kit of the primary school child as the office worker. It is not so long ago that the idea of students needing computers for study was considered a financial imposition, but with WAP technology it's as easy to link to personal emails or work files whether you're up a mountain or on a train (signal permitting, of course) and the key communications hub is now as transportable as the phone from which it originates.

Text marketing enables organisations to get right into people's pockets, should they want.

There are some factors to keep in mind:

- New media individual or one-to-one communications are becoming less about email alone: they are about access to the individual in whatever form, whether through pictures, email or SMS texting.

- Issues of data protection become critical. Should mobile technology mean that phone texting becomes as clogged with spam as email, the real opportunities of value-marketing for consumers will fail.
- It is possible that mobile personal communications exacerbate consumer expectations for more innovation and responsiveness at faster speeds more than any other tech-applications, since the maturation of the web.
- Mobile communications portals (such as phones or hand-helds) have become as much a status/fashion statement in the youth market as clothing or music.

For marketers, the challenge is not just to keep up with the technology, but to stay ahead of consumer demand for ever more innovative communications approaches. At present the most obvious marketing application is SMS text messaging.

TXT MSG 4 U...

The texting phenomenon started in the US, where locally networked pagers preceded phones. The shortened "texting" lexicon this has generated has now entered the colloquial language across the globe and appears everywhere, from broadsheet advertising, real-time voting (via TV links) to poetry competitions.

For the youth market that, in itself, has been a big selling point: just one stage on from the teenage thirst for secrecy/privacy and the urgent desire to build up a life that is impenetrable to mentoring adults. With individual communications, to know the language (text-speak) and have the latest piece of techno-kit is to be in fashion.

Where does that leave the marketers? It is not so very long ago that universities and colleges had to begin to get to grips with a new web interface. There was a need to develop copy appropriate to this instant access medium that encouraged the dip-in-and-out information gathering style that defines web surfing.

The challenges of marketing now, though, demand a much greater attention to the individual. While tailored marketing is frequently applied by institutions, to manage personal/mobile communications, whether through email or texting, requires some major shifts in the marketing management:

- A significant data management function is needed to keep records up to date and to handle data protection implications, a process best outsourced.
- The style of one-to-one communications may need to be radically different from the corporate style of the organisation or its traditional marketing communications interface: who will determine and manage this style equity?
- The rules of competitive engagement for marketing methods such as texting are critically different. Marketing communications need, of course, to add value and the precedent of rapid and updateable information has been set by everything from football scores to breaking news, pollen count alerts and music charts.
- There is a major impact on planning horizons for marketing campaigns. One-to-one-marketing is all about rapid response, quick turn-round and flexible timing.

TEXT EDUCATION

There are obvious applications for the education market place, including everything from clearing information to new course updates, but what are the rules of the one-to-one-game?

- Most messages or campaigns are short-life and centre on "alerts": updates on facts, figures or the availability of a product or service.
- This determines that message forms must be brief, impressive and useful.
- Messages are so short-lived that they only work well as part of a coordinated information campaign, when updating is possible sequentially and at any time.
- Opt-in campaigns are best for everyone as they comply with data protection and ensure that you have the most receptive audience on board. The best way is to get targets to sign up through other media, for example when they request information from you.

Texting is big news now, but doubtless the next generation of mobile personal communications will ensure that picture messaging is just the beginning of the next big initiative.

Rosemary Stamp is Director of Stamp Consulting, providing strategic advice and consultancy support to education and public sector organisations across the UK and Europe.

rosemary.stamp@stampconsulting.co.uk

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