

# Texting against AIDS

## SMS message to promote HIV education

Can text messages help stop the spread of HIV/AIDS? Text to Change (TTC), a Ugandan NGO, thinks the answer is yes. To prove it they have teamed up with Zain to launch an innovative project that utilizes a technology that has been rapidly expanding to make sure that HIV/AIDS does not do the same.

Uganda has been widely hailed as Africa's "AIDS success story." In the 1990s, as HIV/AIDS epidemics were ravaging the continent, Uganda was one of the few countries credited with mounting an effective campaign to counter the disease. From a peak in 1993, when it had the highest infection rate per capita in the world with over 15% of the adult population testing positive, according to the World Health Organization, Uganda managed, by the turn of the millennium, to reduce HIV prevalence to six percent.

However, after such dramatic progress, there are now signs that HIV/AIDS may again be on the rise. While there's some ambiguity as to whether HIV/AIDS prevalence is increasing or has reached a plateau, the trend lines of mobile phone use in Uganda are perfectly clear.

The Uganda Communications Commission reports that the number of mobile phone users will hit the six million mark by the end of 2008. In urban areas, as many as 50% of people have mobile phones, compared to 10% in rural areas, according to the 2006 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (DHS).

TTC and Zain saw in the expanding reach of mobile phones an intriguing new way to combat the disease.

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### *Spread the message stop the virus*

One of the most important reasons why Uganda managed to reduce infection rates in the 90s was that the government launched a campaign focused on educating people about the disease and encouraging them to get tested. Yet for all the campaign's success, the message did not make it to much of the population. Today in Uganda, while almost everyone has heard of HIV/AIDS, knowledge levels are often very low; the DHS found only about 30% of women and 40% of men had an accurate understanding of the disease.

The TTC project is an effort to better reach that uninformed majority by harnessing the powers of a technology that is changing the way Ugandans communicate with each other.

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Beginning on Valentine's Day 2008, some 15,000 Zain subscribers in the Mbarara district in southwestern Uganda received an introductory text message asking if they would like to participate in a free interactive quiz about HIV. In order to entice subscribers to respond, rewards such as handsets and airtime were offered for correct answers.

Once a subscriber agreed to participate he or she received a text once a week with a new multiple choice question, such as "What is the difference between HIV and AIDS?" and "How is HIV transmitted?"



Those who got the question right automatically received a message offering free HIV counseling and testing and the opportunity to enter a draw to win various prizes, while those who didn't, received a message explaining the correct answer.

About 2,500 of the 15,000 subscribers contacted responded to each question. At the end of the trial period of questions and answers, all participants were encouraged to go for voluntary counseling and testing (VCT). TTC said that "the response level of our pilot Quiz was on average 15% per question." (<http://www.texttochange.com/projects.html>)

Winners of the HIV quizzes were invited to an award ceremony on the April 18, 2008 at AIC Mbarara branch premises, where they received mobile phones.

As a means to encourage people to get tested, the program seems to have been as effective as its organizer's had hoped. According to Robert Natlaka, AIC's representative, requests at their central Mbarara facility rose by 100 percent over the pilot's six-week duration." Natlaka said that "255 [participants] turned up to AIC in Mbarara for testing; some others also went to AIC partners [around] the district."

The Mbarara branch of the AIC confirmed that people who came for VCT, did so because of the SMS messages received, the radio program and the organized marching through Mbarara Town. The program was officially launched

by His Lordship the Mayor of Mbarara Wilson Tumwine. In his speech he praised the ground breaking Text to Change initiative. He said that all good things start with a good idea and claims to be very proud that Mbarara has been chosen for the pilot. He said that this programme has the potential to change the lives of the people in Uganda and especially those in rural communities.

Bas Hoefman, the public relations officer at TTC, noting the increased traffic at counseling and testing facilities, said that the "launch has been a huge success." Still, he added, "this program is a pilot and meant as a trial to see if the approach could be successful. The next step is to run the SMS quizzes in the local languages, so that the people in the rural areas, who don't speak English, can also be reached with HIV/AIDS sensitization messages. In the end, we want the quiz to be accessible for every Ugandan."

The project's goals are not limited to Uganda. Indeed, TTC's ultimate ambitions are global. As Hoefman says, "Besides the enormous growth of Mobile telephony in Africa, we think that the anonymity of mobile phones could be the reason that the program will become an enormous success. We genuinely believe that mobile telephony is the key to reach people with health communication messages in third world countries and especially in Africa. Therefore, it is our firm ambition to become a global platform of telephony based health services."