Communications for change:

How to use text messaging as an effective behavior change campaigning tool

Produced by FrontlineSMS and Text to Change

FRONTLINE**SMS**   TEXT TO CHANGE

COMMUNICATIONS FOR CHANGE

Introduction

SMS can be an extremely effective campaigning tool, helping to drive positive social change by increasing awareness of key issues and giving people the information they need to take their well-being into their own hands. SMS is ideal for these types of campaigns in many ways: it is immediate and intimate, coming straight to a device you carry with you most of the time; it works even in places where other digital communications channels fail; and, if received at the right time, it can provide an incredibly meaningful intervention. SMS can also be sent to many people at once, using aggregators and other service providers.

> The total number of SMS sent globally tripled between 2007 and 2010, from an estimated 1.8 to 6.1 trillion.
>
> In other words, close to 200,000 texts messages are sent every second*

However, getting SMS campaigns right is not simple. The right content, delivered at the right time in the right context, is critical. Adding the right kind of interaction to campaigns can make them more engaging, and increase their power in encouraging positive change. Positive behavior change campaigns should also ideally be measurable - this is never easy, but when your recipients are difficult to access physically, as is often the case with SMS campaigns, this becomes more challenging.

This guide seeks to introduce some key points to think about when planning to use SMS for behavioral change campaigning.

Best Practices

Context is king

DO research the mobile market and infrastructure in the context in which you plan to run your campaign. SMS is in many ways ubiquitous, as it can generally be received across all networks and on any mobile handset in the world. However, many local factors relating to the way networks price their services and the way that people use them, as well as availability of handsets and mobile signal, have an impact on whether SMS is the most effective communications channel for your campaign.

DO find out which communication patterns people use and trust. Make sure to spend time learning how people use mobile in the region, and whether they are accustomed to using SMS. Take the time to research how SMS is viewed differently in different cultures; in some places it will be routine and accepted for an organization to send an SMS, while in others it would feel like an invasion of a private communications medium.

* http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/material/FactsFigures2010.pdf

DON'T ignore cultural norms and their impact on communications patterns. In areas where poverty and supply restrict access to handsets, people may share phones, and this can increase access to an SMS campaign even among the very poor. However, in some cultures handset ownership may be restricted or controlled for women and girls, or may be less likely for certain ethnic groups. These factors should be researched and considered when you are deciding what kind of data you'd like to send out via SMS and who you'd like to send it to.

DON'T presume that everyone will be able to use SMS. Factors such as illiteracy - both in language and technology - will affect this. In areas in which the population is illiterate, a voice-based solution may be more suitable for your campaign.

Effective content is central to a good campaign

DO use the language and dialect of the people you are trying to reach. Consider the script in which the local language is written, and whether this is accessible on mobile devices.

DO usability testing with the software and content before launching your campaign. Pre-testing is important in order to ensure that your campaign has been effectively designed and structured.

DO engage people with interactive questions and incentives. SMS campaigns are effective in reaching the target population to hear their views. Campaigns can be more efficient and response rates much higher if people have an incentive to interact with you. A simple way to drive engagement is to give away prizes to participants, such as airtime, mosquito nets, inexpensive mobile phones or radios.

DO engage local partners when producing content. Local partners can help you ensure the content you are producing is suitable for the context you are working in. Tailoring content to the needs of your target population often increases the likelihood of success.

DON'T send messages too often or without permission from the recipient. It is important to provide people with the opportunity to subscribe and unsubscribe to your campaign. You should also avoid sending messages at inconvenient times, like late at night, early in the morning, or on religious festivals and sacred days. This is a simple but important consideration, which can have a huge impact on whether your messages are read, appreciated, and acted upon.

DON'T write long messages. Think carefully about how to get your message across in 160 characters. This remains an enormous challenge and should not be underestimated. Try to get your point across within one SMS, in order to communicate a succinct message at a low cost and ensure that the message is not confusing for those on simpler handsets which cannot display multi-part SMS as one message.

Text to Change HIV/AIDS awareness campaign
Lira, Northern Uganda

This SMS campaign aimed to improve HIV/AIDS awareness and to increase the number of people seeking HIV counseling and testing in Lira, Uganda.

Radio commercials were used to reach 145,000 people asking them to subscribe to the Text to Change HIV/ AIDS SMS Quiz. The quiz consisted of 19 questions testing both the respondent's knowledge of HIV/ AIDS and retrieving background information, like sex and location. Additionally, Text to Change targeted a group of 7,000 people with SMS questions regarding HIV/AIDS awareness and sent messages to encourage people to go for free HIV testing – provided by the AIDS Information Centre.

Results and conclusions

- HIV testing at the Lira AIDS Information Centre increased considerably following an SMS reminder of the free service; in fact test uptake doubled!
- Response rate of the SMS survey was high, with more men participating than women
- 96% of all participants stated that the survey had helped them to gain new knowledge
- The average age of participants was 28
- On average, 74% of all questions sent via SMS were answered correctly
- Women were better informed about family planning issues than men

More information

http://www.texttochange.org/news/sms-reminders-double-hiv-testing

Creating sustainable behavior change campaigns

DO allocate human resources to manage your SMS campaign. Having a member or team of staff accountable for the SMS service will help ensure your SMS campaign is sustainable, interactive and receptive to people's needs. People often reply to SMS with questions and comments - make sure you are responsive. Ignoring those replies can lead to a loss of goodwill. All you need is 15 minutes, several times a day, to manage most campaigns with up to a few thousand participants.

DO consider the costs involved in running an SMS campaign. Although SMS can be a relatively cheap option compared to some other campaigning and communications methods, it is nonetheless important to consider the cost of outbound messages. If SMS cost is high, interactions will need to represent real value to users in order to engage their interest and lead them to spend money interacting with your service. Alternatively, you could make it free for people to send messages to you by working with local mobile network operators to get a toll-free number or by topping up participants over the network for the cost of the SMS they've sent, via USSD. If you do cover message costs in this way it will raise the cost of running the campaign, though. In addition to messages costs, there will also be costs involved in research, data analysis and project management of your SMS campaign.

> With 5.9 billion mobile-cellular subscriptions worldwide, global penetration reaches 87%, with 79% penetration in the economically developing world. (2011) *

DO careful needs and communications assessments of your target community. To create sustainable behavior change through campaigning it is advisable to do a thorough needs assessment of your target community before you start out, in order to ensure you are able to address and respond to their needs effectively.

Effective impact measurement

DO identify measurable indicators of success at the outset, as milestones your project can use to gauge its progress and effectiveness. Good indicators provide a clear focus for the project and serve as an instrument for learning. Milestones and indicators should aim to be SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timebound.

DO ensure you collect baseline data on those indicators, enabling you to measure the change your campaign creates over time. An SMS campaign can only be shown to be effective if the results are measured.

DON'T miss the opportunity to collect feedback via SMS. Interactive SMS campaigns are important because they allow you to engage populations in interactive dialogue, to improve the service and learn from your mistakes. You can use this interactivity as a feedback mechanism; asking people how useful your campaign has been via SMS.

* http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/facts/2011/material/ICTFactsFigures2011.pdf

FrontlineSMS and Georgetown University's Institute for Reproductive Health (IRH) - sexual reproductive health in India

Georgetown University's Institute for Reproductive Health (IRH), a global organization dedicated to improving reproductive health worldwide, used FrontlineSMS to provide a rapid prototype of a new mHealth service. This service - called CycleTel™ - empowers women by providing them with accessible reproductive health information through SMS. CycleTel facilitates the use of the Standard Days Method® (SDM) of family planning, which is a simple fertility awareness-based method of family planning that teaches a woman to identify her fertile days each menstrual cycle and avoid unprotected sex on these days in order to prevent pregnancy. By making this fertility information accessible via SMS, CycleTel helps women take charge of their reproductive health and use an effective family planning method.

Results and conclusions

The results, from interviews with over 100 women who tested CycleTel for two cycles of use, were very promising.

Georgetown University's Institute for Reproductive Health

- Feedback on the initial trial of the service showed that CycleTel could improve family planning use and knowledge, as well as cooperation between partners.
- The majority of users felt that it was easy to communicate with their husbands about the fertile days; about 70% of participants showed their husbands messages from CycleTel.
- 92% were very satisfied with CycleTel as a method to prevent pregnancy.
- 100% of users would recommend the service to friends.

With positive proof-of-concept results, IRH decided to partner with ThoughtWorks, a global IT consultant with offices in India, to build customized software to automate the service. The formative research using FrontlineSMS, and especially the feedback from test users, was essential to determine the product scope and functionality, and the potential of CycleTel to enable positive behaviour change.

More information

http://www.frontlinesms.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/FrontlineSMS_IRH_CycleTel_2011.pdf

FrontlineSMS

FrontlineSMS lowers barriers to driving transformative social change using mobile technologies. They build and distribute free and open-source software; provide support and resources to their users, and share their expertise to help inspire others. In addition, FrontlineSMS can provide tailored support and training to organizations seeking to deploy mobile technology in their social change projects.

FrontlineSMS believes in giving local people ownership of the tools they need to change their world for the better. They have never monitored an election, or run a healthcare clinic, but those using their software have — and FrontlineSMS help them to use mobile technologies in their work, without dictating how their software should be used.

By providing software which uses available technology — affordable laptops and basic mobile phones — FrontlineSMS helps organizations in both economically developed and under-developed countries to overcome communication barriers they face.

Text to Change

Text to Change implements a wide variety of projects. They have a broad range of experience in conceptualizing, managing and analyzing several mobile phone-based programs in Africa and South America. They use mobile technology to improve people's lives in developing countries in a very simple and efficient way.

Text to Change sets up interactive SMS campaigns, together with NGOs and companies, focused on improving healthcare and education, stimulating economic development and creating awareness on environmental issues. Moreover, all basic phones are able to receive SMS. To overcome the illiteracy barriers they make use of Interactive Voice Response services (IVR) as well. Participation is fun, free, informative, easily accessible, anonymous and above all it can be lifesaving. In order to further strengthen its SMS campaigns, Text to Change also has set up a call centre, which focuses on data collection and research.

Which technology should I choose?

Both FrontlineSMS and Text to Change use ubiquitous mobile technologies to address a range of vital needs in many sectors, such as healthcare, education, economic development, and governance. FrontlineSMS provides free, open source software and support for organizations that wish to set up and manage their own SMS services for outreach and interaction with target populations and staff. Text to Change sets up SMS campaigns for organizations in South America and Africa, sending out and collecting information for use on a wide range of issues. An analysis of an organization's location, capabilities, budget, and goals will help to determine which tool is more appropriate.

Further useful resources:

- Text to Change: www.texttochange.com
- FrontlineSMS: www.frontlinesms.com
- Check list for assessing the suitability of SMS and mobile for communicating with disaster-affected communities:
  http://infoasaid.org/sites/infoasaid.org/files/context_analysis_checklist_310811.pdf