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Consumer and Business Owner Attitudes to Text Marketing

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ABSTRACT

Text marketing is receiving attention as a new way for businesses to market their goods and services to an increasingly text-literate public. This study investigates the power of the SMS channel as a marketing tool. A review of the literature identified eleven opportunities and five challenges for text marketing. A simplified pre-test – experiment – post-test experimental design was used to assess attitudes of business owners and consumers. Ten text marketing campaigns were conducted to provide participants with common experiences in the use of SMS as a marketing tool. The study validated suggestions in the literature or results of other studies – high response rates for SMS marketing, importance of ad content, and potential for viral marketing. Generally, consumers were more receptive to text marketing than the business owners. The results of this study will be of interest to e-marketers and businesses, especially SMEs, considering using SMS for marketing purposes.

Keywords

mobile commerce, mobile business, mobile marketing, SMS marketing, text marketing, text advertising

INTRODUCTION

The diversity of channels for marketing products and services has never been greater. The print media, radio, television, electronic mail, and the Web – each were, at one time, the newest opportunity for businesses to enhance sales. Today each of these is well established, mature, and widely used advertising channels. Now, the commercial world is considering another marketing channel – short message service (SMS) or “text messaging” – which offers new opportunities and challenges for marketing.

SMS enables short text messages of no more than 160 characters to be transmitted to a mobile phone. Although the SMS-capable population covers all age groups, ethnic groups, and social backgrounds, it is a medium that frequently is not utilized properly and effectively, or even as part of the standard marketing tool set (Jackson, 2004).

The first mobile marketing campaign was for Top of the Pops in 2000 (Wiggin, 2002). Since then SMS has been used in a variety of marketing campaigns to promote Chapstick (“Chapstick Sheds...”, 2002), Smirnoff Ice (Hargrave, 2002), breakfast cereal (Gupta, 2004), tourism (Netherlands Board of Tourism, 2004), a London radio station (Tran, 2003), McDonalds (Anderson, 2003), KFC (“KFC Goes Mobile...”, 2003), BMG Records (Orshoski, 2003), and many others too numerous to list.

SMS has also been used to promote political causes (Borger, 2001), movies (Becker, 2001), customer loyalty schemes (Carter, 2004), Web sites (Dudley, 2004; Morrison, 2004), real estate (De Bruin, 2003), and dating services (Rubens, 2004).

A few studies have measured consumer or business owner attitudes to text marketing (e.g., Barwise and Strong, 2002). However, none of these studies measured attitude changes of business owners and consumers both before and after a variety of SMS marketing campaigns, as is done in this study.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the attitudes of both business and consumer communities in regard to the adoption and utilization of SMS for marketing. The study also identifies eleven opportunities and five challenges to text marketing success, summarized from a comprehensive review of the SMS marketing literature. Accordingly, the research questions are:

- (1) What are consumer and business owner attitudes toward the use of SMS to promote products and services?
- (2) What opportunities and challenges are presented by the advent of text marketing?

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SMS MARKETING

Space limitations prevent a complete analysis of the drivers behind SMS marketing. The follow paragraphs provide a brief summary from a comprehensive literature review by Brink (2004).

Mobile phone penetration: No one can deny the phenomenal growth in mobile phone usage around the world (see, for example, Sell'ng Trends (2004) and the GSM subscriber clock at www.gsmworld.com). Not only is the total penetration significant, but also mobile phone usage is especially high in the youth market, a group with increasing amounts of disposal income and the primary consumer audience of the future.

SMS growth: Not only is mobile phone use increasing, but more and more consumers are using their phones for texting (Rauch and Casison, 2004) and, again, especially in the youth market (Haig, 2001; Tran, 2003) and, increasingly, in the United States ("Text Messaging Takes Hold...", 2005). Nevertheless, is there really potential marketing power? Would social users of the SMS channel agree to receive commercial text messages?

Receptivity to ad messages: Extremely gratifying to the business community are the strong positive indicators that text users are open to receiving text ads (e.g., Barwise and Strong, 2002; "Vast Majority...", 2003). In one of the most comprehensive SMS marketing studies to date (Barwise and Strong, 2002), including 35 brands with 1,000 mobile users over a six-week period, 93 percent of the users experienced satisfaction with the SMS marketing service and 84 percent said that they would recommend the service to a friend.

More direct, personal, and interactive marketing: Unlike traditional marketing channels, the SMS channel has the ability to target at an individual level. The "shot-gun approach" to advertising – creating ads and then firing them in the general direction of consumers in the hope they hit the right target – is no longer acceptable. Instead, SMS marketing can deliver a personalized message to the individual where they are.

Time-based marketing: SMS marketing messages can be directed to the target audience at a specific time and time response to the ad can be detected. Cadbury Chocolate's campaign determined whether a particular bar of chocolate had been bought for consumption at lunchtime or for a slow chocolate binge after dinner. Southern Comfort achieved unprecedented results by timing SMS broadcasts to 9pm on Fridays and Saturdays, when the target audience (18- to 29-year old males) were out nightclubbing, but still sober enough to switch to Southern Comfort ("Southern Comfort...", 2003).

High response rates: Another way in which the SMS channel outperforms traditional channels is in the response rate and viral marketing ability of the medium. The first mobile marketing campaign, for Top of the Pops in 2000, shocked the business world with a response rate of over 20 per cent (Wiggin, 2002). This compares with a 5.2 per cent response rate for direct mail campaigns and 6.1 per cent response rate for email campaigns (Empocket, 2003). Subsequent campaigns with high response rates have included 10-20 percent for Smirnoff Ice (Hargrave, 2002), an average 13 percent response rate for an ongoing ad campaign for London radio station Kiss-FM (Tran, 2003), and a 44 percent response rate for a Guinness ad during the 2002 World Cup (Der Pool, 2003). For viral marketing purposes, 94 percent of SMS marketing messages are read and an overwhelming 23 percent of these messages are shown or forwarded onwards to friends ("SMS Response...", 2003).

Speed of response: The very nature of the mobile phone with its built-in, direct response capability enables rapid response by the SMS recipient. During one SMS campaign that had a 20 percent response rate, 41 percent of the respondents responded within the first minute and 70 percent within 24 hours (Barwise and Strong, 2002).

Brand recall: The wireless channel has also proven itself in regard to strengthening of brand recall and loyalty. One study showed that brand recall after an SMS campaign tends to be over 50 percent (Haig, 2001). Empocket found permission-based mobile marketing to be 50 percent more effective at building brand awareness than television and 130 percent more effective than radio (Der Pool, 2003).

Cost effective advertising: In comparison to other marketing media, the SMS medium is extremely cost-effective. A well-conceived SMS marketing campaign can move a consumer from the company's Web site to their phone and into the store making purchases in a matter of hours for as little as ten cents (Bodnarchuk, 2003). The technology allows the campaign to be launched quickly and inexpensively – no graphic design, no model shoots, no printing, just send out the message to interested parties. Furthermore, the SMS channel can "piggy back" on existing, more traditional media channels that are already utilized by the company. In one campaign, 90 percent of viewers who responded to a television advertisement inviting them to text message to enter a competition, sent a message within 15 minutes of the broadcast (Haig, 2001).

Service-based advertising: Similarly, SMS ads can be integrated into consumer-based SMS services that are already being offered by the business. Examples include news alerts from Sky News (Kelleher, 2003a), ferry sailing times by Irish Ferries (Kelleher, 2003a), and product brochure requests from Wickes Home Improvement Centers (Balmond, 2003).

Longitudinal market research: Unlike a landline or a postal address, a mobile number is associated with an individual for a long period of time. This factor enables the effective tracking of respondents over time. Furthermore, marketing research can be enhanced with the immediacy of text ads. With SMS, respondents can respond to a survey at the moment of each event, enabling the researcher to gain a more accurate understanding of the subject's experiences.

CHALLENGES TO SMS CHANNEL ADOPTION

With such an impressive list of drivers of SMS marketing, it is easy to develop a one-sided view of the SMS channel, focussing only on the benefits. As with any technology or marketing medium there are realistic concerns. The literature discusses these in detail (see Brink, 2004) and they are summarized in this section.

Impact of new media: Any new advertising channel can have a significant impact on the company, and this can be especially so with SMS-supported services and applications (Oliva, 2003). Over 70 percent of companies involved in the SMS arena are either relatively new to direct marketing or there are divisions that are not used to direct marketing (Kelleher, 2003b). Companies not adept to coping with change management tend to shy away from adopting new technology, including SMS, sometimes appropriately so.

Focus on the customer, not the technology: The temptation with any new technology is to make it a solution in search of a problem. It is imperative that businesses concentrate on customers needs first rather than on the need to utilize new technologies. Managers who emphasize technologies over customers do so to their own detriment (Balasubramanian, Peterson, and Jarvenpaa, 2002).

Mobile spam: Perhaps the biggest threat to SMS marketing is the alienation of consumers by sending too many unwanted ads to their mobile phones, diluting the medium's marketing potential. Companies have been overly zealous and broadcast their marketing message to thousands of recipients who, for the most part, have found the messages irrelevant and/or annoying (Kirby and Ross, 2002). Problems have already arisen in the United States (Roush, 2004) and in Japan, where carriers such as NTT DoCoMo have implemented filters to reduce spam (Sewell, 2002).

Inappropriate messages to youth: Because of their high use of mobile phones, it is only natural to target teenagers. However, this raises a concern that young children will be targeted by irrelevant and/or even harmful SMS marketing messages. This is especially so when parents lack the control they have with this media that they do with television or Internet use. Children receiving unsolicited text messages is a substantial concern with 97.7 percent of parents (Carter, 2003).

Privacy concerns: Because the mobile phone is such a personal device, many consumers have privacy concerns about the quantity and content of the messages they receive. This is especially so when location-based services are combined with the advertising; then consumers worry about their location being tracked and recorded (Belmond, 2003). The important point is to achieve the right balance. Right to privacy must be balanced with the right to market by establishing mechanisms of consumer choice, for example opt-in and opt-out (Petty, 2003).

How prevalent are the eleven opportunities and five barriers outlined above in the general population? The answer to this question is the primary focus of the remainder of this study.

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

In order to fulfill the goals of this study, both interviews and surveys were conducted to determine the attitudes of the business and consumer communities to SMS marketing. Generally, the study followed a pre-test – experiment – post-test experimental design in which (a) attitudes and characteristics of business owners and consumers were assessed, then (b) a variety of SMS marketing campaigns were conducted, and (c) the attitudes of business owners and consumers were assessed again, especially to detect any change in attitudes as a result of participation in the campaigns. This section follows this design, with each aspect of the methodology being discussed in turn. For economy of space, results are reported in each section.

Pre-Campaign Business Owner Interviews

Ten New Zealand business firms agreed to participate in the study. The businesses were chosen to reflect a cross section of industries so that when generalizing results out to the general business community, validity of the results can be ensured. None of the ten companies had ever used SMS for marketing purposes, so bias to the SMS medium as an advertising tool was minimal.

Interviews to assess the attitudes of the business owners toward the use of SMS marketing, specifically the channel's marketing potential, were conducted during August 2004.

When asked directly about their attitude to text messaging, half had a favorable response to social use of SMS and four respondents viewed SMS marketing in a favorable light (see Table 1). Several negative comments were made about the impact of "textspeak" (the abbreviated language used by many texters) on children's ability to spell words correct.

Attitude	Social	Marketing
Unfavorable	5	6
Favorable	5	4

Table 1. What is your attitude to text messaging in social/marketing situations?

The next set of questions focused on the business owners' perceptions of how text marketing could affect their business. Five of the respondents felt SMS messaging would benefit their company (three felt no and two were unsure). When asked specifically why SMS marketing might be useful (more than one response was allowed), most felt it was an effective means of direct and targeted advertising (see Table 2).

Benefits	Respondents	%
Direct and targeted advertising	6	60%
Customer always has message on phone with them	4	40%
Popularity of text	2	20%
Economical in cost	2	20%
Viral marketing / network marketing	0	0%
Don't think it could be beneficial	0	0%

Table 2. Why do you think text marketing could be beneficial?

Pre-Campaign Consumer Survey

In order to assess pre-existing consumer attitudes to SMS marketing, a comprehensive online survey was made available to mobile phone users in New Zealand, through the Textvouchers.com Web site. This survey was completed by 334 mobile phone users before commencement of the text campaigns.

Space limitations do not allow a full presentation of the consumer group profile here, but detail is available in Brink (2004). Key demographics of the consumer group are:

- Fifty-six percent of respondents were female, which closely matches the New Zealand population of 51%.
- Geographically, the urban-rural mix of the survey respondents is similar to New Zealand, but there is a slight bias toward North Island residents in the survey.
- Not unexpectedly, the youth population of New Zealand is over represented in this sample, with 79% of the survey respondents being under the age of 29. However, this distribution is likely to closely represent the mobile phone ownership profile of New Zealanders, for which comparable data are not available.
- The survey respondents are active Internet users, with 93% using the Internet daily.

The next set of questions assessed the consumers' previous experience and pre-campaign attitudes to SMS marketing.

Most consumers (273 (82%)) had never received a text message that advertised a company's product or service. Of the 61 (18%) who did receive a text ad message, most (47 (77%)) did not make a purchase based on that advertisement.

How does this group of consumers feel about receiving text messages that advertise products? Almost all (294 (88%)) believe it is acceptable for companies to send advertising via text; 91% (304) have never been annoyed by a company's text message; and 88% (295) feel that text messaging is not only for teenagers.

This group of consumers wants to receive product or service discounts (a form of advertising) directly and personally. Sixty-four percent prefer discounts via SMS and another 19% by e-mail. Why? In comments, one consumer volunteered "it makes me feel special to receive a message from a company." Another consumer commented it is better "to be with me on my

mobile phone than a magazine in the bedroom at home". Other forms of mass advertising scored much lower (e.g., flyers (9%), television (5%), Internet, newspaper, radio (all 1%)).

The final section of the pre-experiment consumer survey probed for details about how text ads could meet consumers' needs and preferences. Many consumers don't care what time of the day they receive their marketing message (35%) or what day of the week they receive it (57%), so long as they receive the message. Otherwise, 17% preferred messages on a Monday (no other day ranked higher than 6%) and late morning hours (10am = 18%; 12pm = 19%) were preferred over afternoon and evening hours. A consumer who selected 12pm commented that that it would be "cool to receive a food discount when I was hungry."

Somewhat surprisingly, 71 percent of consumers in this group were happy to receive non-solicited text advertising from companies. This is a higher proportion than what was expected, considering the potential spam problem discussed above.

In this survey, text ads offering discounts were highly valued (39% wanted five or more messages per day) over non-discount ads (29% wanted five or more per day). A non-discount ad is typically a text notification such as "Our summer swimwear is here. Check it out."

When asked what type of discount is best, 37% (97 of 260 respondents to this question) preferred "buy 1, get 1 free" discounts. Next was "free item with purchase" discounts (74 (28%)), then "percentage discounts" (e.g., 10% off) were preferred by 23% (59) of participants while "dollar discounts" (e.g., \$2 off) were least preferred (30 (12%)).

When participants were asked about the important aspects of the content of an SMS marketing campaign, 100 (43%) of the 234 respondents to this question felt the most important aspect of the message is that it be straight to the point. Others felt the most important aspect was it be entertaining (57 (24%)), in the language of someone from the target group (47 (20%)), interesting (15 (6%)), or personalized (15 (6%)).

Consumers were also asked about opt-in and opt-out measures. Almost three-quarters (141 (73%) of 193 respondents to this question) felt a company must either have a previous relationship with the customer or obtain the consumer's permission before sending out a text ad. An even larger percentage (288 (86%) of all 334 respondents) felt that text advertisements should always have an opt-out option in them.

Text Campaign

The next step in this research was to conduct ten text campaigns with the companies and consumers that participated in the interviews and survey. At the last minute one business owner declined to participate, but another company volunteered to run two campaigns.

The response data from all ten campaigns are shown in Table 3.

No.	Company: Type	Sent out	Redeemed	Response	Day	Time
1	A: Food	256	27	11%	Saturday	10am
2	B: Clothes	448	22	5%	Saturday	9am
3	C: Food	46	9	20%	Monday	12pm
4	D: Stationery	46	3	7%	Tuesday	9am
5	E: Health	47	2	4%	Wednesday	2pm
6	F: Health	44	0	0%	Thursday	4pm
7	G: Food	44	0	0%	Friday	5pm
8	H: Food	44	0	0%	Tuesday	7pm
9	I: Food	44	0	0%	Sunday	9am
10	B: Clothes	445	16	4%	Saturday	1pm

Table 3. Response data for text campaigns

Three types of SMS marketing discount campaigns were used. "Free item with purchase" discounts were sent out to text recipients in campaigns 1, 3, and 9. Percentage discounts were sent out in campaigns 2, 4, 5, 6, and 10. Dollar discounts were sent out in campaigns 7 and 8. "Buy 1 get 1 free" discounts were not utilized in any campaign.

Text messages in campaigns 1, 2, 3, and 10 were personalized with the recipient's name and a greeting. Messages in campaigns 1 and 10 were written in "textspeak" to appeal to the youth audience that was being targeted in these campaigns.

As can be seen from Table 3, the response rate to the text campaigns varies in relation to the variables of time and days of the week. The highest responding campaign was run on a Monday at lunch time (20% rate of response). Low response rates were experienced from Thursday through to Sunday and at times later in the day.

Post-Campaign Business Owner Interviews

After the text campaigns had been completed and the statistics had been collected, a follow-up interview was conducted with the nine companies that had participated in the campaigns. These interviews were to collect information relating to their experiences as a result of the campaigns as well as to identify any new issues or attitudes that may have arisen following the experience of a real SMS campaign.

The first set of questions in the post-campaign interview tried to determine how satisfied the business owners were with the campaigns. Four owners (44%) experienced good results, leaving a slight majority (5 owners) who were not pleased with the results, but largely because they thought more people should have received the message. Seven of the nine owners would use SMS marketing again, but four of these owners would do so again only if it were free.

Business owners were asked to identify what they felt could be done to increase the response rate. Five of the nine felt there was an insufficient number of recipients to get good results. Six of the nine felt that the customers would have responded better if they had requested the discount themselves by, for example, texting a keyword to receive a discount text message back.

In follow up comments in the interviews, five of the ten business owners would not modify the message. Two indicated they would change the message to offer a percentage discount or something free.

Post-Campaign Consumer Survey

Of the 334 consumers who completed the pre-campaign surveys, 111 were able to participate in the text campaigns. Campaign participants had to live in Auckland (New Zealand) to have reasonable access to the discounts and a few Auckland residents declined to participate due to personal reasons. Some survey questions were related to the text campaigns conducted as part of this study; other questions assessed their attitudes and views to text marketing, including changed attitudes.

Eighty-eight percent of the consumer group indicated that they forwarded a good text discount to friends or family. This supports the viral marketing aspect of SMS marketing. Furthermore, 73% would be more likely to participate in a promotion if a friend or family member had forwarded the message to them. In comments on this question, a few participants indicated they felt they should be rewarded for forwarding discount messages to friends. They realize the power of viral marketing and they want some incentive to participate in network marketing.

When asked about the impact of a prize or incentive to redeem text discounts, two-thirds reported that these factors had increased or greatly increased their motivation (see Table 4). In comments on this question, four participants specifically mentioned the desire to receive more text discount ads.

Prize impact	Respondents	%
Greatly increased my motivation	21	19%
Increased my motivation	52	47%
No impact on my motivation	30	27%
Decreased my motivation	7	6%
Greatly decreased my motivation	1	1%

Table 4. How did the voucher offered during the campaign affect your motivation to purchase the product or service?

Similarly, reasons for participating most (60%) indicated it was "cool" and another 23% thought the ads offered "good value". When asked why they did not participate, two-thirds (66%) thought the ads "did not offer good value" while others (11%) indicated no money and (10%) said they had no transport to get to the shops.

In comments on the campaign generally, one survey participant commented positively on the idea of requesting discounts via SMS. A consumer should be able to request discounts by texting special keywords to receive a personalized discount text message back.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Many of the trends and findings reported in the literature review have been verified in this study. Business owners in New Zealand, like those elsewhere, are dissatisfied with existing media and are looking for alternatives such as SMS. For example the 40 percent of UK companies dissatisfied with Web-based advertising (West, 2001) was similar to what was found in this study. Similarly, consumer use of mobile phones (92 percent preferred texting) is similar to the 90 percent in Tran (2003) and the seven text messages sent per day in NZ is just under the eight messages per day figure reported by Haig (2001).

Response rates in this study – between zero and twenty percent, but with six campaigns great than 10 percent – matches the 10-15 percent reported in other studies (e.g., Hargrave, 2002; Tran, 2003). Customer preferences for "buy 1, get 1 free" is also consistent with findings of other studies (Consumers Vote..., 2003).

There are several limitations in this research, which suggest a few recommendations for future research. First, the number of consumers varied between the pre-test and post-test surveys because the text marketing campaign was limited in its geographical area. Future studies would benefit from a larger and more consistent survey audience. Second, this study was limited to SMS. A comparative study between different advertising media – television, print, Web, e-mail, and SMS – but similar advertising format and target groups would help to clarify which is most effective. Third, the comparability between the campaigns was limited due to the variety of factors used (e.g., different days, different times). Better controls on campaign variables would yield results that could be examined more precisely. Finally, a number of text messaging opportunities – push versus pull, business-consumer dialogue, incentives for viral marketing – were not fully explored in this study.

The key outcome of this study was new insight into consumer and business owner attitudes to text marketing. If companies considering a text-based advertising campaign heed the advice given in this paper, they will increase their chances of a successful campaign.

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