

Getting Your Message Across: Mobile Phone Text Messaging

Abstract

Want to send a message that 99% of your audience will read? Many Extension professionals are familiar with using social media tools to enhance Extension programming. Extension professionals may be less familiar with the use of mobile phone text-based marketing tools. The purpose of this article is to introduce SMS (short message system) marketing and provide a starting point for using mass text messages in Extension programming.

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Background

Extension professionals are tasked with taking research from the university to the public. Increasingly, Extension's audiences are using mobile technology. In 2013, Pew Research reported that cell phone ownership in the United States reached 91%, making it the fastest consumer technology to achieve that adoption rate in about 30 years (Rainie, 2013). Moreover, cell phone adoption is relatively high among populations that are perceived as slow adopters of new technology. For example, those living in rural communities, those without a college education, those earning less than \$30,000 per year, and those aged 55–64 have adoption rates of 85% or greater (Rainie, 2013). In that same Pew survey, 56% of respondents reported owning a smartphone, which provides access to the Internet. Among African Americans and Hispanics, smartphone use is higher (64% and 60%, respectively) than it is among Whites (53%) (Smith, 2013). Social media platforms and applications that can support Extension have been described (Gharis, Bardon, Evans, Hubbard, & Taylor, 2013; Typhina, Bardon, & Gharis, 2015), yet widespread adoption of new technologies by Extension professionals has been slower to take hold (Diem, Hino, Martin, & Meisenbach, 2011). In this article, we describe how and when to use texting to enhance Extension programming, using two projects as illustrations.

What Is SMS Marketing?

Text-based marketing, also known as SMS (short message system) marketing, can be accessed through online

companies (e.g., EZTexting.com, Trumpia.com, SlickText.com). Mobile Squared Marketing estimates that 90% of text messages are read within 3 min of delivery and that over 99% of all text messages are read by the recipient (Lane, 2010).

A web-based texting program operates much like an email marketing service. Text messages are entered into a web page and sent on a schedule established by the marketer. See <http://text-message-marketing-review.toptenreviews.com/> for reviews and comparisons of text-based marketing companies.

Text-Based Marketing in Extension: Two Examples

In our first example project, readers of the Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Science of Parenting (SOP) blog were asked to sign up to receive text notifications about new blog content. Users could sign up to receive the text notifications by texting the keyword "sciparent" to a short code number. This sign-up option was advertised on the blog and on applicable social media sites. We hoped that such text notifications would encourage readers to access the blog content while they were using their phones so that locating the blog would be easy and convenient for them. At the same time, we disseminated the same message via Twitter.

Marketing researchers have stated that effective messages should be brief, funny, and/or entertaining; relevant to the target group; and distinctive and informative (Barwise & Strong, 2002). We provided a brief message identifying the topic of the blog for the week as a teaser to induce people to immediately access the blog (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Example of a Science of Parenting Text



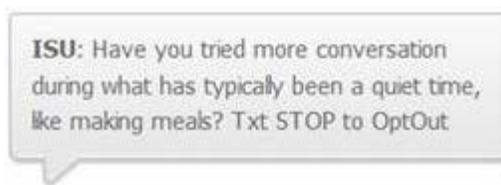
Each week when a new blog post was made, a text message with a direct link to the new post was sent, along with a tweet on Twitter. The basic text plan we chose limited us to texting only; we could not also connect with social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter (an option that would have required an upgrade). This meant we had to post texts and tweets separately. Also, because of limitations on the number of characters we were allowed on the basic plan, we could not include a picture or even much of a "teaser" in a text message, both of which we could do on Twitter. On the other hand, an advantage to texting was that texts could be created and scheduled to go out at future dates all in one sitting at the computer.

Google Analytics data indicated that we had more visitors to the blog who got there by clicking links from Twitter than visitors who signed up for the text messages and then clicked a link in a text to reach the blog. Given the amount of extra work required to create, schedule, and deliver the texts, we came to the conclusion that this approach was not a good use of the technology.

Our second example involves the use of text-based marketing with a parent education course titled Thrive by 5. In the course, we teach parents easy ways to use children's books and related activities to provide literacy-rich environments for their infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. In this case, the texts were reminders and tips related to strategies the parents had learned in class (Figure 2), along with attendance reminders. The content of the texts mirrored the content of the class for the week. For example, we might text "When you are reading with your child, ask what will happen next" after a class session focusing on asking questions during reading. Parents received two texts per week on average, in addition to completing checklists to report the activities and strategies they used at home.

Figure 2.

Example of a Thrive by 5 Text



At the end of the course, all parents rated the texting positively and further indicated that they would like to receive texts more often than 2 days a week. In this example, texting was appropriate and welcomed by the target audience. Parents reported that the texts helped them remember to practice strategies they learned in class and that a daily reading or parenting tip would be something they would appreciate and use.

Conclusion

After using text messaging to enhance two Extension projects, we concluded that the first method, using texts to increase readership of a blog, was not an effective use of texting. A national blog is more of a "newsfeed" type platform that does not involve the back-and-forth dialogue that offers readers a personal trusting relationship. Without that relationship, readers may not feel comfortable providing their cell phone numbers (even though we used a keyword sign-up and did not see their numbers). With the second approach, texting was effective. The purpose was much more specific and tailored to the activities of a class the participants were engaged in. Additionally, we had a relationship with the participants. The texts we sent would not have made sense on social media because the target audience was small. We found that texting can be a good way to reach a specific audience with a specific message and ensure that they read the message. In other words, using a texting program may be more beneficial with a smaller group or with clientele with whom a trusted relationship has been established. As with other tools we in Extension use, just having the tool is not enough. Knowing how and when to use the tool is an important lesson learned.

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