

SMS is a good fit for mobile marketers

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Mobile instant messaging is on the rise, rapidly emerging as one of the preferred channels for communication between mobile phone users around the world.

Consulting firm Deloitte estimates that mobile instant messaging services will carry around 50 billion messages on an average day in 2014, compared to the just 21 billion SMS text messages sent.

The ratio of mobile instant messages to text messages sent each day is likely to keep growing, in favour of instant messaging, as more and more users sign up for services such as WeChat and WhatsApp. Yet, despite its rapid growth, mobile instant messaging is not yet a substitute for SMS in mobile marketing and communication. For a range of reasons, it might never be.

Not everyone has a smartphone

South Africa remains dominated by prepaid users, many of whom opt for lower-priced feature phones. The majority of connections are still basic 2G voice and SMS services, and simple 2.5G data services, rather than 3G or LTE connections. According to market researcher, InMobi, 65% of South Africans still use feature phones.

That means they are excluded from using most over-the-top instant messaging services such as WhatsApp, BBM, and WeChat. SMS, by contrast, can reach any of your customers who own a GSM mobile phone, whether they own the oldest cellphone or the latest Apple iPhone.

The instant messaging market is fragmented

So you're going to reach your customers by instant messaging? Great. Which services are you going to use? BBM, Apple iMessage, WeChat and WhatsApp users cannot talk directly to each other, so you'll probably need to sign up for all the services to reach all of your smartphone-owning customers.

Indeed, you'll need to do a lot of market research to find out what your customers use before you even begin.

SMS is favoured for B2C communication

Customers are accustomed to receiving a range of communications from companies via SMS, including payment reminders, banking notifications, and promotions. By contrast, they see instant messaging as a tool to talk to friends and business colleagues.

Many customers may find it intrusive to receive advertising and marketing messages in this medium. SMS is less intrusive because the recipient feels able to respond in his or her own time, where an instant message seems to demand immediate response.

Bulk SMS tools and services are simple, mature and easy to deploy

It's simple to sign up for an SMS service, integrate it with your marketing databases, and start sending messages to your customers. This is more complex in the world of mobile instant messaging because the market remains fragmented at this time. The reporting tools are also powerful and easy to use.

SMS offers fewer barriers to opt-in

To market to your customers via instant messaging, you'll need to obtain their instant messaging details and possibly persuade them to add you as a contact, in addition to your normal opt-in processes. But you probably already have their cellphone numbers and can start interacting with them as soon as they opt-in to receive your messages.

Its far reach, immediacy, and simplicity means that SMS remains one of the most powerful marketing and communications tools at any company's disposal.

Even as technology develops and consumers migrate to instant messaging for most of their communications needs, it is likely to remain a preferred medium for business to consumer communication well into the future.

ABOUT JACQUES SWANEPOEL

Jacques Swanepoel is the Chief Operating Officer at Cellfind. His career started in the Information Technology industry in 1991 where he was exposed to diverse sectors such as Government, Health, Commerce, Medical Aid and Telecommunications. During his IT career, Jacques worked at various companies in positions ranging from IT Specialist, Assistant Director and consultant to Projects and Product Management.

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