

COLUMNS

Making SMS a fashionable option for brands

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By AN AMERICAN MARKETER COLUMNIST

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Everyone wears socks. And most of the time socks are about as mundane as a daily essential can get: muted blacks, navy, gray. We get that they are necessary, but why cannot they also be bold? I want my socks to stand out, to be a conversation starter, a chance for me to distinguish myself from others.

This holds true for brands too: SMS can be the boring three-pack of cotton knee-highs, plopped loosely in an indistinguishable bin which people barely take notice.

I think I can fashionably argue that SMS messaging does not need to sock.

Mobile trinity

The standout reason why SMS messaging is a brand's "sock" is that while it is an essential part of a marketer's mobile engagement strategy, it is generally flavorless and looks exactly like the marketing strategies of competitors.

However, there are numerous ways to create a mobile program that stands out and is truly extraordinary.

When assessing text communication at the macro level, it helps to begin by breaking down the engagement activities into the three lenses of mobile: information, promotions and CRM.

When used properly, engagement in one lens serves as the hook to draw users into another lens, creating additional stickiness between brand and consumer.

This model transforms SMS marketing from a simple push mechanism into an integrated communication tool.

The consumer will not only be identified by preferred content, but also offered a more personalized relationship with the brand through a scalable mobile experience.

Let us break it down:

1. Informational content. This relates to anything via mobile that aids a customer in retrieving information about a brand. Store location, new item alerts, tips and tricks, sending information to you phone from web, shipping alerts and even receipts.
2. Promotional experience. This content is centered on user participation in anything from mobile clubs to opportunities to participate in user-generated content campaigns, immersive interactive experiences, personalized invites, scratch-and-win games, or even the eccentric karaoke sing-along (yes, on mobile).
3. CRM conversation. This offers marketers the opportunity to provide consumers with information loyalty program

status, surveys, product referrals and mobile coupons.

From here, marketers can organize SMS outreach and offer relevant content based on the needs and desires of mobile users.

Talk with me, not at me

The beauty of texting is that it is a dialogue, not a monologue. Who the heck wants to sign up for an auto-dialing cyber-in-law? If a brand is going to be granted access into a user's personal space, you simply cannot afford to spam.

And no, dynamically inserting a user's name into a text header is hardly enough to be considered targeting. Instead, brands must understand who their customers are, their likes, preferences and patterns.

Mapping and connecting disparate consumer data points from point of sale, email, CRM warehouses and other backend databases to the mobile medium moves the texting program to an entirely different level.

Imagine a user with a single-use mobile coupon going into a store to buy an item. When the coupon is scanned, the system recognizes that the customer executed a transaction, assigns credit to their loyalty profile, and sends a thank-you text along with a customer satisfaction survey.

Based on the user's survey feedback, the company now has the intelligence to make any necessary changes to the program, send additional relevant offers to the customer, or even trigger a personal call from the brand's leadership.

As one can see, a program like this immediately evolves from being a bland exercise in pushing out generic 160 characters to a compelling exchange and differentiator. SMS evolves from a quick-to-engage channel for brand marketers into a key learning tool for insights on your valued customers.

The key to SMS marketing is this one-on-one conversation between brand and consumer, pivoting your brand from a mere marketer to a facilitator along the path to purchase.

MGM Resorts in Las Vegas, for example, has leveraged SMS technology tying in with the front-of-house check-in process.

Upon guest arrival, guests who opted in with the reservations clerk received messages designed to drive them to different business units (e.g. spa, restaurants, retail) on the MGM property during their stay, with the goal of keeping their guest from wandering off to competitor hotels.

At the end of the guest's stay, SMS content would shift from motivating on-resort engagement to rebooking a room, while the cadence of messages would also slow.

SMS as a gateway channel

Personalizing SMS outreach is not the only way to craft an engaging mobile strategy. Tricking it out with improved technology is sure to steal a few glances.

Take the advent of HTML5 and the explosion of applications as a means to transport the consumer into an experiential digital ecosystem.

Links within a text message, supported by the incorporation of HTML5 serve a strong purpose, perhaps associating to a company's mobile site or to a registration coupled with a promotion.

But brands can get even more creative. Think about jazzing that link up by connecting with a digital scratch-off card and having users swipe their finger across their screens to reveal hidden offers. Or how about a spin-the-wheel or a similar type of gaming-based engagement? The prospects are boundless.

Toys "R" Us was quite innovative this past holiday season when it looked to resurrect its once-famous jingle, long lost in the music archives.

Customers were encouraged to text in to receive the lyrics to the song via text, immediately followed by a call. The user would then be encouraged to sing along to the jingle melody.

Once the user's voice was married to the music, it was sent back to the participant as a link in a text. From there the user could listen to her recording and share it across social networking sites. Holy karaoke.

This gateway also expands engagement beyond mobile and into multichannel, bridging the gap between phone, computer, tablet and in-store.

From this cross-channel engagement spawns more opportunities to deliver information, coupons, tips, rewards, contests, surveys and other trivia so long as marketers are sure to hone in on specific nuggets of relevant consumer, unique depending on the channel.

Try on a complete engagement

Consider the vast array of solutions that abound the mobile space, and across the board, engagement begins with awareness, desired participation, and imaginative and personalized retention tactics.

The corporate behavior of repeatedly texting the same message of "sale, sale, sale" or "coupon, coupon, coupon" are predictable and will not resonate forever.

Brands need to move from dry dissertations to dynamic conversations when communicating with their consumers. It is time to step out of the comfort zone, take off the black socks of mediocrity and give your mobile program life.

Yes, now is the time for brands to find an SMS strategy that does not sock.

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