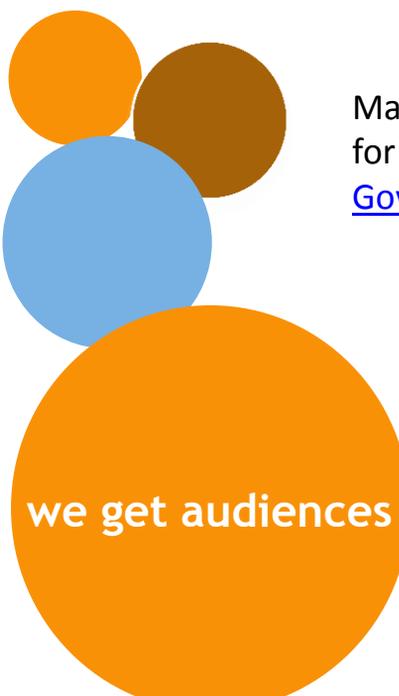


# How Government Agencies Can Use SMS

Many thanks to Neustar, Joanna McLeod and Lucy Weston-Taylor for their insightful white paper, [“Introduction to SMS use in Government,”](#) produced in June 2009.



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# Why SMS for government

The general availability of SMS — those 160-word characters exchange on mobile phones — from the most basic handsets to the most feature-rich makes text messaging the lowest common denominator for information dissemination. Moreover, citizens don't need smartphones or expensive data plans to remain informed.

Put simply, the key benefit of SMS to local, state and federal government agencies is the ubiquity of SMS — nearly 100 percent of mobile phones can support — and the high likelihood of text messages being read soon after receipt.

In this white paper, we will discuss how SMS can help government disseminate information quickly and to a wider base of population. Under-served segments of the population, especially in terms of Internet access and other information-delivery mechanisms, can also be reached using SMS.

As mobile phones overtake landline service in many homes, permission-based mobile communications becomes even more critical for both government and business.

Since most consumers have their mobile phone within reach and keep the device always on, government agencies can make public information and government services accessible to the population anytime and anywhere.

For example, SMS is an ideal communications tool to disseminate emergency information during natural disasters, terrorist attacks or service outages. Both government and citizens can benefit from the use of SMS in these cases to save lives or seek information on official services.

Another benefit of SMS is the two-way communications that is achieved with the general population.

Indeed, SMS offers a simple and effective way to communicate with government agencies to voice opinions or receive additional services. This opens the door for citizens to have their voice heard and effect change in the services they receive and the direction of government.



# 15 Lessons Learned

## 1. SMS not necessarily a standalone channel/medium

Text messaging is a useful tool for reaching specific audiences. So far, government agencies have used it to reach groups such as those without permanent addresses or for teenagers, but it is moving beyond being a technology only for niche audiences.

As an example of this, the Electoral Enrollment Centre's Text To Enroll campaign sought to address the youth market, but found a much broader demographic were using text messaging to register.



However, SMS is still not a communications channel that every single person can be reached by, and as such, agencies should probably use other channels in addition to text messaging to ensue complete coverage.

# 15 Lessons Learned

## 2. Get your records management team involved from Day One

It is probably the message that you want to keep, not how you are sending it out, but either way, any consideration of implementing SMS services should involve your record keepers from the get go.

It is also very important to consider how you are going to be structuring your database so that those SMSes can be kept, and searched.



# 15 Lessons Learned

## 3. Privacy issues need to be considered

Some departments use cell phone numbers that they have previously collected from their customers for their SMS service.

The concern about this practice is that personal information held by the government is used only for the purpose for which it was collected or a directly related purpose.

Agencies need to check that the SMS that they want to send is directly related. Otherwise, they need to seek consent from people, or ask them to opt in.

While the Unsolicited Electronic Messages Act 2007 does not apply to government departments, it should be treated as a best practice document.

In essence, the Act says to be clear about who the sender of texts is, and to provide a functional way for the recipients to indicate that they do not wish to receive messages in the future — a way to unsubscribe.



# 15 Lessons Learned

## 4.

### Protecting the authenticity of text messages from the government is vital

SMS is not usually encrypted technology, and intercepted messages may contain personal information.

In order to be an authoritative source of information, agencies need to make sure that their text message systems are secure.

The potential for embarrassment and confusion if SMS services were hacked and inauthentic messages were sent is quite considerable — consider the impact if malicious texts were sent out claiming to be from a government agency saying work permits were cancelled, for example.

For more information, see  
<http://www.smsspooing.com/>



# 15 Lessons Learned

5.

## **SMS is a two-way communications channel**

SMS is used effectively as a one-way outbound channel, or as a channel that sends automated replies to inbound messages.

However, agencies need to realize that in implementing a SMS service, they are opening up a two-way channel, irrespective of their intentions.

Dealing with inbound messages individually is a time-consuming task, and many agencies may not have the personnel to meet demand.

If an agency does not want to reply to individual inbound messages, there needs to be a clear strategy for dealing with these unsolicited texts (these could be queries, Comments, feedback, abuse), and these customers should be steered into using a different communication channel.

It is important that text messages that are received are acknowledged in some form.

Automatic filters may help to sort inbound messages into appropriate response categories.



# 15 Lessons Learned

## 6. SMS may be superseded by another technology in the future

Mobile internet is becoming more popular. If agencies are committed to developing ways that the public can interact via text message, they should also consider how customers may want to access their services in the future.

## 7. SMS services are sometimes delayed

It is not unheard of for telecommunications companies to become overloaded, and therefore time-critical messages should have a back-up system in place.



# 15 Lessons Learned

## 8. SMS can be helpful for those who are hearing-impaired

Many hearing-impaired people find text-messaging to be an ideal form of communication, as no audible conversation is needed.

However, those who are visually impaired are less likely to use text-messaging. As with other factors, multiple channels of message delivery therefore need to be considered.

## 9. Paid services delivered via SMS can be charged to the customer easily

SMS offers the opportunity for “pay to text” services, that allow charges to be put onto a customer’s phone bill instantly.

The Ministry of Economic Development use this feature for their \$1 (70 U.S. cents) charge to use TXTB4UBUY, and there is the potential for other agencies to develop similar services.



# 15 Lessons Learned

## **10. Consider customer's preferences on how to be contacted**

Ideally before any agency starts text-messaging their customers, they would have asked for explicit permission beforehand. In asking for that permission, agencies should also offer alternative forms of contact — email, telephone, postal service, and so forth.

How will a customer's preferred form of contact be noted?

## **11. Have a plan for a massive response and no response**

Agencies need to be realistic about their audience when they start offering an SMS service.

They may be inundated with responses, or they may get fewer responses than expected.

Either way, it is important to be prepared with a backup plan for extra support, or extra promotion of the service.



# 15 Lessons Learned

12.

## **How will agencies define success?**

Before undertaking any SMS project, agencies need to consider what success will look like.

For the Electoral Enrolment Centre, success took the shape of the number of young people who joined the electoral role.

For ImmigrationNZ, it was a reduction in the workload of its call center. The measures of success will vary depending on whether SMS is being used to deliver information or a service.

13.

## **The SMS scheme may need to be promoted**

If an agency's measures of success include a large uptake of the SMS service, it may need to be promoted, either through advertising such as the Electoral Enrolment Centre's campaign to get people to enroll to vote via SMS, or through other forms of contact with the agency.

It is important to consider the costs of promotion when preparing a budget for the promotion.



# 15 Lessons Learned

## 14. SMS is exactly that — a short message

SMS is a good vehicle for short straightforward messages. Agencies may wish to use another communication channel for more complicated, long or disputed messages.

## 15. The use of SMS by a government agency may have an impact beyond the team it emerges from

Agency teams much consider the impact that an SMS scheme will have on the agency as a whole. Are there other branches that will need access to the scheme? Is this going to take traffic away from another department?



# HOW TO LEASE A SHORT CODE

There are three easy steps to obtain a short code.

First, from the Common Short Code Administration Web site at <http://www.usshortcodes.com>, find the short code that the government agency seeks. If a specific code is not necessary, the system will assign a random code upon request.

Next, apply for the code by submitting necessary registration data and wait for approval.

Once approved and paid for, the short code will be assigned to the government agency for use. The government agency can renew the short code if it wishes to continue using it.



# HOW TO LEASE A SHORT CODE

## **Find**

Use the [USShortcodes.com](http://USShortcodes.com) search engine to determine if the desired code is available.

## **Apply**

Fill out the online application and submit for review of completeness and accuracy.

Apply for a random short code or select a specific code within the range of available five-digit (20000 to 99999) or six-digit (222222-899999) codes.

The final approval decision is emailed to the applicant and the payment processed once the applicant is accepted.

## **Receive**

Once payment is received for an accepted short code, the Common Short Code Administration assigns the number to the applicant for the period of time that the government agency has requested.



Wireless service providers are notified of the assignment, and no one else can lease that short code for the duration of the government agency's contract.

