

Is there a valid role for text messaging within a corporate communications portfolio?

Forecasting trends within the UK economy has never been an exact science: rapid advances in technology over the past three decades have made it even more difficult to predict the future of many sectors with any degree of certainty. Whitehall can perhaps be forgiven for underestimating by several orders of magnitude the total number of mobile telephone users. Back in 1984, when the erstwhile Department of Trade and Industry awarded licences to the first two cellular operators, the assumption was that just 300,000 people would be using the technology by 2010.

Given the way in which cellular networks were to be operated, using analogue signal technology, that would have been a well-considered estimate based on what was understood about the limited services that could be offered. The arrival of UK digital cellular networks in 1993 made those forecasts meaningless: the 300,000 figure is now likely to be 66 million lines by 2010.

The GSM digital protocol employed to make more efficient use of the radio spectrum included a complete portfolio of features on which new services could be developed and exploited.

When the specification for GSM was announced, the Short Message Service facility was dismissed almost out of hand: who would want to bother keying in words through a 'telephone' keypad when it would be so easy just

to speak? Ask that question to the users who between them are sending close on 220 million of these short messages every single day in the UK alone, and the true value of SMS as an instant method of communications becomes apparent.

Cost-effective communications

So much for the history lesson. What the development of digital communications does indicate, however, is that the diversity of tasks to which SMS can be harnessed is limited only by the imagination, so long as an application lies within the technical capabilities of the networks.

As the delivery mechanism for corporate information systems, text messaging represents a relatively cheap and highly efficient method

How far has Avanquest Solutions succeeded in adding value to customer information networks by developing a text message server for the distribution of bite-size information to a targeted audience?

Short messaging appears to integrate well with corporate information systems

of taking bite-size pieces of information out to an audience.

The GSM protocol which defines SMS provides for confirmation that a message has been sent and delivered; two valuable features in the process of communications, although 'delivery' does not guarantee, of course, that the recipient will do anything with the knowledge that has been imparted.

Text Message Server

It was with an appreciation of the potential for SMS as a business communications medium that Avanquest Solutions developed its Text Message Server, which it launched in 2001.

As a solutions provider to the public and private sectors, the operation - which traces its origins in the UK back to 1987 - had been successfully developing 'best of breed' workplace efficiency solutions for its customers. Many of these applications involved integrating communications technologies.

Short messaging was seen as a powerful tool for delivering the benefits of that integration. Jeanette Fennell, the SMS Product Manager for Text Message Server Solutions at Avanquest Solutions, outlined the strategy behind the company's product set.

"The objective was to build a message handling facility that could sit on a corporate network and distribute SMS messages to a list of recipients contained within the user's information systems.

"It had to be flexible enough to handle the distribution of the same short message to everyone on a large customer database, a single highly personalised text to just one of those contacts - or any option in between."



Having developed and proved its technology, the Avanquest application has been targeted at any environment where the ability to communicate rapidly to a geographically dispersed audience adds value to the customer's business processes.

In practice, those 'processes' range from the cost-effective distribution of election results in District Council elections, to a university mailing out reminders its student about forthcoming examinations and a TV production company keeping the different teams of actors and support staff up to speed on schedules.

Reducing truancy in schools

Avanquest has found a receptive audience in the schools sector of education, where the need to contact parents and guardians urgently, had been identified. For a proportion of UK secondary schools, that need arises perhaps too frequently.

As Fennell noted, "Children who are absent from school without permission are a problem

Applications for text messaging range from the cost-effective distribution of election results in District Council elections, to a university mailing out reminders its student about forthcoming examinations and a TV production company keeping different teams of actors and support staff up to speed on schedules.

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for their school and their parents; notwithstanding any danger to themselves. The ability to contact the parents or guardians immediately it becomes apparent that a child has not registered - and there is no reason on record for their failing to attend - is an excellent use for text messaging. There is a far greater likelihood of reaching someone on their mobile during the day than on a landline.”

How parents contact the school when they receive an alert is a matter of policy for that organisation: for the best of reasons, some head teachers require that they call in on a voice line: others encourage a return SMS.

Avanquest provides mobile numbers for these return texts, offering a range of numbers where appropriate so that the responses from different year groups can be channelled to specialist members of staff more easily, for example. Adding dedicated SMS response numbers in this way improves the school's ‘business process’.

Applications beyond absenteeism

It would appear from the Product Manager's description of the Text Message Server as a tool for controlling truancy, that its market might well be limited to large secondary establishments where unapproved absence is a major concern and involves attendance officers phoning long lists of parents individually.

Closer examination of the ways in which the system has been taken up by schools would indicate that it has applications right across the spectrum whether or not there is a perceived problem with absenteeism.

It is a highly effective method of notifying parents when the school cannot open for the day; hopefully not a regular occurrence, though one which proved all too common during the bad weather of 2007 and 2008.

As a means of updating parents about everything from school plays to the closing date

for payments for an overseas trip, the ‘single message to multiple recipient’ approach is simple and cost-effective to set up.

And because the messaging engine can handle merged data fields, each message can be personalised with the recipient's name so that texting does not appear as a cold and impersonal means of communication. Taking SMS back to basics, it was brought into the mobile phone protocol essentially as a method of sending a short message to one person.

“The highly personalised, one-off short message is a great way for school staff to communicate with parents to tell them that their child has been given an award for excellence in class or has been selected to take the lead in the school play and – by the way – would they mind helping with the costumes?”

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Capital costs can be shared

Whatever their size or status, schools are not awash with spare funds. Could there be a resistance from school managers to commit to the capital cost of a messaging system, and then the charges for the messages sent out?

Jeanette Fennell explained that the costs of the solution depended on the scale of the implementation, so that small junior schools would encounter broadly the same costs per child as a much larger school.

“A model that is attractive to local authorities is to purchase a licence which covers all of their operations including the schools for which it is responsible. It can then take the decision to fund the capital cost out of central resources, leaving individual schools to pay only for the message charges.”

Avanquest has found a receptive audience in the schools sector of education, where the need to contact parents and guardians urgently - a child not attending school, for example - had been identified.



There is a full audit trail of every message handled by the server, with its time and date, recipient, receive status and message content. A school could therefore demonstrate that it had acted in a timely and responsible manner.

Security and activity log

Reference to address lists and data being drawn in from information systems could ring alarm bells in the mind of those responsible for data integrity and protection in a school. The Avanquest system necessarily has to access the personal phone numbers of all the parents and guardians taking part in the scheme: if the data for a 'mailing' is taken from the central pupil database, the spectre of data leakage and even child protection looms large.

Looking at how the Text Message Server works, it is clear that none of those concerns would be justified. Access to the user interface is through secure login to the email platform or school intranet. Assuming that the school network itself meets the appropriate standards of security, with a resilient firewall, it is not possible for confidential information to be misappropriated by unauthorised users.

Jeanette Fennell provided an additional measure of confidence. "There is a full audit trail of every message handled by the server, It tracks the time and date of each message, its recipient, its sender and receipt status, and the message content.

"In the event of a subsequent inquiry, a school could demonstrate that it had acted in a timely and responsible manner."

Markets in different sectors

If the diversity of applications found for the Text Message Server is any indication, the Avanquest solution has already proved a valuable communications tool across several market sectors.

Schools are clearly benefiting from the cross-fertilisation of ideas which come out of the developers working with councils and the private sector. All have a common objective, to improve their operations by communicating through the most effective medium. The teams which wrote the SMS specification two decades ago would probably not have conceived it as a tool in the fight to improve school attendance. §

Imposing an additional workload?

With the ability to send any kind of message from a pre-formatted truancy alert to a one-off text, it would be reasonable to assume that managing the Text Message Server application was not far short of rocket science. While there will be time saved by not having to phone parents of absentees, could the system prove too complex as a communications system for everyday use?

Avanquest's Product Manager did not accept that view of the solution, noting that it is typically 'driven' from a standard email interface: it is indeed no more difficult to use than setting up an email where the user selects multiple recipients from the address book.

"The recipient list can also be drawn in as a simple text file from the school's management information system if that is the preferred method of working.

The Text Message Server has now evolved to the point where Version 7 can integrate fully with school information systems to streamline the process still further.

"What is more important, perhaps, is that it is feature-rich, and schools are free to use just the parts of the application they need or are comfortable with. In designing the Text Message Server, we have drawn heavily on the requests we have had over the years from customers to include new features."

Above: SMS is proving a highly effective method of updating parents about everything from school plays to the closing date for payments for an overseas trip, the 'single message to multiple recipient' approach is simple and cost-effective to set up.