SMS in the Education Industry

Use the most ubiquitous mobile messaging medium to converse across generations of students and teachers

In 2013 it was estimated that of the 15.5 million people aged 15-64 years in Australia, 2.9 million, or 19%, were enrolled in formal study.[1] There were also a total of 3,645,519 students attending school in 2013.[2]

With numbers like these, it is obvious how important education is to Australians. As with any large industry that affects so many people, effective communication is essential. The flow of information about education needs to be smooth and inclusive. With children in schools, parents of children in schooling, university students, teachers and administrators, there is a diverse range of stakeholders. This means it's important to establish the most effective communication strategies to keep everyone in the loop.

Implementing the most ubiquitous, accessible, easy and efficient channel for communication among so many different people is imperative.

1 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013, "Education and Work, Australia"
2 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013, "Schools, Australia, 2013"

Evaluating mediums for communication in the education system

There are many options for facilitating communication in a digital era, finding the right one for schools, universities and training institutes can be difficult. A rigorous analysis of all the different mediums for communication within educational institutions is necessary to determine the most suitable channel.

Email

Email is a popular and accessible means of communication across broad groups of people, however there has been a rise in mistrust of email recently due to the frequency of email spam. Market research from 2009 estimated that in 2013, 84% of email traffic would be spam, a 3% increase from 2009. [3] With figures like that, it is understandable why people are becoming more resistant to opening emails. SMS is the more trusted avenue of communication for the general public, with a 98% open rate compared to a 22% open rate for emails. [4] Furthermore, email is a more time-consuming avenue to facilitate communication between students, teachers and parents who have busy schedules. On average it takes 90 seconds to respond to a text message, compared with 90 minutes to respond to an email. [5]

Social Media

Social media is among the newest communication channels, there is no doubt that it is rising in popularity and already dominates a large sphere of internet activity. Social media is extremely popular among younger demographics.

However, the education sector involves a diverse range of age brackets. In fact, of the 2.9 million people aged 15-64 enrolled in formal study in 2013, 41% were aged 15-19 years and 24% were aged 20-24. [6] This leaves 35% aged between 25 and 64. It is also worth considering that the parents of young students, as well as some teachers, are also included in the older age bracket. They are also important in the communication processes for the smooth running of an educational system.

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3 The Radicati Group, 2009, "Email Statistics Report, 2009-2013"
4 Frost & Sullivan, 2010,
5 SnapHop, 2012, "Mobile Marketing Statistics"
6 ABS, 2013, "Education and Work, Australia"

According to Pew Research Centre, the frequency of social networking sites use corresponds with age, with younger demographics being more prevalent users. In 2014, Pew estimates that 89% of online adults aged 18-29 use social networking sites. However, only 69% of online adults between the ages of 50-64 do. Even less than this, 49% of online adults aged 65 and over use social networking sites.[7] Therefore, social media communication may not be the most suitable medium for communication throughout the education system due to the varying ages of stakeholders.

Furthermore, recent research conducted through the University of Oregon states that "96% of smartphone users text message, and 98% of text messages are read compared to 29% of tweets and 12% of Facebook posts."[8] Despite smartphones allowing access to internet at all times, SMS still prevails as the most common form of contact for smartphone users above the social media channels.

Phone calls

Phone calls are a traditional medium for communicating in the education system. However, they are resource-draining in terms of occupying valuable employee time and costing significant amounts of money through phone bills. SMS can be automated to instantly contact thousands of people in seconds, and can cost as little as six cents a message. Not too mention, phone calls also occupy the time of the receiver as well. Whereas, SMS messages are read when the recipient is ready to read it and, on average, within five seconds[9], taking up very little time for the recipient.

SMS

Consistently over time, SMS has remained the most ubiquitous medium for mobile communication. In fact, in 2010, with 4.16 billion users, SMS was the single most popular data channel in the world.[10]

Ubiquitous in it's accessibility, SMS is still popular among younger audiences, but familiar to older audiences as well. This means it is the optimal medium for communication in the education sector because it is relevant to young students, mature students, teachers, parents and more.

SMS is also instant, easy to operate and reliable.

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7 Pew Research Centre, 2014, "Social Media by Age Group over Time"
8 Uoregon University Blogs, 2014, Emma Hsu, "Mobile Marketing"
9 Uoregon University Blogs, 2014, Emma Hsu, "Mobile Marketing"
10 The Atlantic, 2011, "Why Texting Is the Most Important Information service in the world"

Uses of SMS for communicating within education

Now that SMS has been established as the optimal medium for facilitating communication in the education system, there are many different ways to implement SMS strategies. To maximise the easy and efficient flow of information enabled by SMS, here are some potential uses of SMS in education.

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Internal staff communication

Reminders

Send SMS messages directly to staff mobiles, reminding them of upcoming events like training days and meetings. SMS is the most convenient way to do this because messages can be automatically sent to all relevant staff in seconds, preventing any disorganisation. It also gives the recipient the details of the event right into the palm of their hand.

Resolving rostering issues

In the event of unexpected staff absences, finding staff covers can be managed quickly and with minimal effort. An SMS can be automatically sent to a group of cover staff detailing all the information about the necessary replacement. This is much quicker than phone calling

or emailing all known cover staff. The group can then respond the the message if they are able to take on the work. This is usually much quicker and provides an almost guaranteed way to fill a staff requirement.

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Parent and school correspondence

Absence alerts

For parents with young children at school, the option to notify the school of an absence through SMS is quick and non-disruptive to their day. Likewise, this option saves the school administration work because the absences are neatly reported in one place for organisational purposes. This also saves employees time on the phone as well as the expenses of phone bills. Likewise, the school can contact any parents to notify them if their child is unexpectedly absent so that there is no confusion and no disruption to the parents work day. SMS can also efficiently inform parents when their child is unwell as well. This means that the parent can easily be informed so as to make arrangements to pick their child up if necessary.

Summer updates

The Australian climate can sometimes create an unhealthy learning environment. Schools may be required to cancel classes in order to prevent any health hazards in extreme weather conditions. Messages can be automated to send in bulk so that every parent in the database receives the same message at the same time, keeping everyone in the loop. SMS provides the most efficient and traceable means of keeping parents updated about any changes immediately.

Emergency alerts

In an emergency situation, when a parent is not answering their phone, an SMS is the best avenue to ensure the message is delivered and received successfully and immediately. The average person checks his/her phone 150 times a day, therefore when a text message is delivered it will be seen as soon as the recipient can get to their phone.

Notifications

Traditionally, reports and important letters from schools were sent by direct mail. This allowed for the possibility of extensive delays. With direct mail, there is also a lack of traceability for the school to know if their important information has been received. An SMS notifying parents of important information, such as an available report, is the most reliable way assure a timely delivery.

Reminders

Reminding parents about impending meetings, events and due payments through SMS is a sure fire way to increase the attendance at events and ensure the timely payment of tuition fees.

Student communication

Scheduling

Inform students about any sudden changes in the timetable and ensure the highest rates of student attendance. Notify students of room changes, meeting cancellations or building closures through SMS to inform them immediately and effectively. Sending reminders of students' appointments with teachers, lectures and events through SMS will also help organise students and assist them with their time-management.

Exam results and deadline reminders

Many leading universities as well as the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) offer students exam results through SMS. This is a quick and efficient way to deliver results and notify students of this important information as soon as possible. Reminding students of deadlines through SMS is also sure to boost results. SMS, being the most popular medium, guarantees that they will see the message quickly and are then more likely to submit their assignments on time.

Library reminders

Overdue library books can be costly for students and learning institutions. Sending SMS reminders to students when they have overdue library resources will facilitate the speedy return of the resources. This will benefit the individual student in saving them any late fees. It will also benefit other students because they will have access to the resource again once it has been returned.

Choosing an SMS provider

The growth of SMS providers has been staggering in recent times, which is mostly due to its identification as a leading communication tool, and demand for the technology being high. It can therefore be difficult for educational institutions to determine which provider is best suited to meet their needs. The best SMS suppliers in Australia will be able to provide a number of distinguishing features and services to maximise the potential of SMS for communicating within educational organisations.

Direct connections to major networks

Delivery is the most important factor determining the effectiveness of SMS communication. Strong connections will ensure the best delivery results and make sure messages make it to their recipient and do so in a timely fashion. There is no point in choosing a medium that boasts speed and reliability, if the results from your provider don't match this.

Customer service

While many SMS services are intuitive to use, it is reassuring to find a provider that will be able to assist with any difficulty that may be faced implementing SMS strategies. Support should be available across a number of channels including phone, email, and social media.. Support could even be offered through a website chat option, so as to always offer the highest standard of assistance.

Ease of use

The purpose of SMS applications should be to simplify the communication process and reduce workloads for staff and students. SMS applications should be easily navigable and easy to use.

Database cleansing

Educational institutions have databases that need to be regularly updated and can quickly become inaccurate. The changing number of staff and students make databases difficult to maintain. Communication is hindered if these databases contain out-of-date information. The most suitable SMS providers will offer a service to assist with cleaning data. This will ensure that the messages are being delivered to the intended recipients.

Integration with current preferences of operating systems

The best SMS providers will offer multiple avenues of incorporating SMS into the daily operations of educational institutions, such as an online platform, an email to SMS platform and an API. Having an API allows customers to integrate their current systems with SMS. Not only do the top providers offer an SMS API, but they will also offer Software Development Kits (SDKs) in multiple development languages.

Reporting delivery results

It's important that the status of SMS sent can be tracked, so that institutions are aware when their messages have been delivered. This is essential to the flow of information and making sure all stakeholders are in the know. Not only that, but without the reporting of delivery results, there is also the possibility of sending thousands of messages to numbers that do not exist over and over again. That's a lot of wasted money.

Experience with other educational institutions

As with any service provided, there is no substitute for years of experience and expertise. The most suitable SMS provider for educational institutions will have worked with other institutions previously and delivered excellent results.

Esendex

Esendex is Australia's leading business SMS provider, with a focus on delivering high quality, secure and reliable services. Esendex holds one of the highest industry reputations for SMS provision. The company has over ten years of experience within the SMS industry, delivering a high-standard SMS solution to over 20,000 customers. Customers have included many educational organisations, including leading universities, high schools and other training institutions.

Esendex boasts direct connections to the major networks in Australia, guaranteeing an exceptional delivery rate. The service standard for the company commits to 90% of messages being processed within 5 seconds and 95% within 20 seconds, although this standard is always exceeded.

AUT University

AUT University, a leading New Zealand based institution, has replaced their traditional method of delivering offers to prospective students. Previously offers were sent through direct mail, now offers are sent through SMS services with Esendex.

SMS has eliminated the delays caused by direct mail services and eased administration duties for the university. The financial savings for the university have equally met, if not exceeded, the time savings SMS provides.

SMS can be less than 10% the cost of a letter sent via direct mail. With a basic letter costing approximately 85c, and the cost of an SMS at 8c, the university has saved circa $7,500 per round of offers.

AUT University has also experienced a boost in the number of enrolments of mature age students since the switch to SMS with Esendex, due to the accessibility of the medium.

Conclusion

The advancement of education in Australia is dependent on effective communication of important and relevant information to all parties involved in the education system. Educational institutions like schools, training facilities and universities need to be able to access varying groups of people such as students, teachers and parents. The best medium for this task is SMS, it is reliable, accessible, affordable and efficient. The best provider to support SMS as a communication strategy, implemented by educational institutions, is Esendex Australia.

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