



SMS in Aged Care

Communicate effectively with residents, families and other stakeholders





Introduction

There were around 169,000 people living in residential aged care in Australia at 30 June 2011, nearly all on a permanent basis. About three-quarters (77%) were aged 80 and over and 57% were aged 85 and over¹.

The population of Australia is growing older, with around one in every seven Australians aged 65 years or over². So the continued development of aged care in Australia should be a priority, as it is clearly an industry growing in size and importance.

As a sector that has such a huge impact on so many Australians, aged care should be constantly improving. The best way to ensure the highest quality of aged care is to maintain the best communication among caregivers, the elderly, and their families.

Evaluating communication mediums for aged care services

Phone calls

Phone calls are a traditional medium for communicating within aged care. They are perhaps the most reliable way to make sure a message has been delivered and understood. If nurses need to contact the families of residents to address any issue, a phone call would generally be their first method.

However, they are resource-draining in terms of occupying valuable employee time. The phone bills and wages also add up as a high cost.

Employees within aged care are better suited to spend their time looking after the needs of the residents. SMS can be automated to instantly contact as many people as necessary in only a matter of seconds. The cost of an SMS can be as low as six cents, too.

Another flaw with using phone calls is that they can often be ignored, especially when not perceived to be urgent. If people are in meetings, for example, they will ignore a phone call, whereas they

1 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012. "Residential aged care in Australia 2010-2011"

2 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009, "Future population growth and Ageing"



may be able to discretely read a text message. SMS is also direct to the source, as 91% of adults have their phone within arms reach, 24 hours of the day³. This is a huge advantage when it comes to critical communication, like reminding seniors to take their medication or reminding staff of important meetings.

Email

Email requires an internet connection; when it comes to communicating important issues, it presents a problem that this may not always be available to everyone. Whether or not your recipients own a smartphone could delay the message being read. Even if people regularly check their email on their computer, they may turn off notifications due to the volume of daily emails. This means periodic email-checking daily, so every hour or so. Even if the email message is urgent, it could be missed, or not looked at for long periods of time. This is a huge risk if your messaging is time-critical, which can often be the case within this industry. The message could be an emergency situation, a medicinal reminder or a rostering issue, and an email cannot guarantee immediate delivery. Furthermore, for the elderly, learning email use on smartphones could present difficulties, and become a barrier to the effectiveness of your communication with residents.

Email is a popular and accessible means of communication, however, there has been a rise in distrust of email due to the frequency of spam. Market research from 2009 estimated that in 2013, 84%

of email traffic would be spam, a 3% increase from 2009⁴. People are becoming more resistant to opening emails, and could choose to ignore your message, believing it could just be more spam. Therefore, even if residents, their families and other stakeholders all had access to email on their mobile devices, they may ignore your email anyway.

SMS is the more trusted avenue of communication for the general public, with a 98% open rate compared to a 22% open rate for emails⁵.

Furthermore, email is a more time-consuming avenue to facilitate communication between stakeholders during implementation of aged care services. On average it takes 90 seconds to respond to an SMS, compared with 90 minutes to respond to an email⁶.

Social Media

There is a lot of talk of social media as a growing communication tool, but it has no place within communication about aged care. Social media is extremely popular among younger demographics. However, communication within the aged care sector is more relevant to an older audience. Therefore, this latest form of communication is largely unfamiliar and in some cases unintelligible to a large portion of stakeholders within the aged care sector.

3 Morgan Stanley, 2010

4 The Radicati Group, 2009, "Email Statistics Report, 2009-2013"

5 Frost & Sullivan, 2010

6 SnapHop, 2012, "Mobile Marketing Statistics"



According to Pew Research Centre, the frequency of social networking site usage directly corresponds with age, with younger demographics being more prevalent users. In 2014, Pew estimated 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 sites⁷.

Social media is also an inferior means of communicating with other stakeholders within aged care. 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 It’s therefore evident that regardless of age or handset, people still simply prefer SMS.

SMS

SMS consistently remains the most ubiquitous medium for mobile messaging. In fact, in 2010, with 4.16 billion users, SMS was the single most popular data channel in the world⁹.

Ubiquitous in its accessibility, SMS is still popular among younger audiences, but familiar to older audiences as well. So residents, their families, nurses and other stakeholders across all ages will be able to effectively receive important messages.

There is no need for internet access in order to reach audiences with SMS. Recipients don’t even need to be immediately available for conversation to receive the information. The message will be there for them as soon as they have a moment to look, which is every five seconds on average¹⁰.

7 Pew Research Centre, 2014, “Social Media by Age Group over Time”

8 Uoregon University Blogs, 2014, Emma Hsu, “Mobile Marketing”

9 The Atlantic, 2011, “Why Texting Is the Most Important Information service in the world”

10 Uoregon University Blogs, 2014, Emma Hsu, “Mobile Marketing”



Using SMS for communication within aged care

Medicine, meal-time and appointment reminders

It's not unusual for patients to forget to take their prescribed medication, however this is more common among the elderly. This is understandable, as a recent review on medication use in Australia found that on average older Australians take nine medications daily¹¹. Nonetheless, forgetting to take medication can be detrimental to health. Reminding residents to take medication at the proper time with an automated text message could provide a simple solution to this issue.

For seniors on fixed incomes, money spent on unnecessary doctor appointments can cost a significant portion of limited finances. Offering SMS options to complement, but not replace, more traditional health care techniques can help relieve some of the financial burden that deteriorating health conditions can have on residents.

A simple text message at meal times is also a great way to ensure full attendance, promoting healthy eating among residents, as well as encouraging social interaction.

Motivational staff communication

Caregiving to the elderly is an extremely rewarding career path for nurses and medical professionals. However, it can be testing at times, given the level of responsibility and patience that is required of these professionals. Some leading aged care facilities have taken to motivating their staff via SMS, because it can reach them at any time, and it's not disruptive to their busy day or to their regular hours. Reminding staff that their work is important, as well as appreciated, via SMS can improve their mood and thus the daily operations within aged care.

11 Department of Health Victoria, 2012, "Healthy ageing literature review"



Planning staff shifts

Nothing is as detrimental to an effective business as insufficient personnel. For aged care homes, it is extremely important that there be enough people rostered on to meet the needs of the residents they care for. This is not just to ensure that the elderly are properly looked after, but also to reduce the stress levels of staff, who may have to pick up the slack if there are not enough staff present. Aged care organisations vary in size, and staff rostering can be difficult and time-consuming, as the ratio of carers to seniors needs to balance. Having staff calling up nurses and carers on the roster to fill shifts can become expensive, and if nurses have to do the calling, it's a waste of their skills.

Using an automated SMS service to communicate available shifts to all staff at once can save staff hours of work, and businesses lots of money off phone bills. SMS can also allow for easy confirmation from staff that are able to fill these shifts. This not only increases the effectiveness of the organisation, but also ensures the highest quality service can be offered by the facility. It also means that the nurses can do what they are good at and qualified for, taking care of their residents.

Notifications to residents' families

Social isolation and loneliness can become a problem for older Australians. With strong ties to depression, social isolation is an issue that needs to be addressed by any aged care home. Usually, this problem is tackled through programs encouraging social interaction. However, visitation from friends and family outside the facility is also important to residents. Sending a friendly reminder via SMS to families and friends about residents' birthdays, upcoming events and general visiting hours could boost visitation.

Gathering feedback

SMS surveys are quick, cost-effective and convenient for respondents, and therefore provide a great means of gaining feedback. Aged care homes could benefit from seeking feedback through SMS surveys from the families of residents, and from residents themselves, about how their service is being performed and how it could be improved. Having this feedback is valuable, not only for improving services, but also for advertising purposes—if the feedback is overwhelmingly positive.



Picking an SMS provider

The growth of SMS providers has been staggering in recent times. This is due to its identification as a leading communication tool, as well as high demand for the technology. The number of providers out there can make it difficult for aged care organisations to make the right choice. To help, there are many distinguishing features that SMS providers should have. Features that will maximise the potential of SMS within aged care.

Direct connections to major networks

Delivery is the most important factor determining the effectiveness of SMS communication. Strong connections will ensure the delivery of messages are successful, and on time. SMS boasts both speed and reliability, your provider should be able to support this.

Customer service

Many SMS services are intuitive to use. However, it is also reassuring to find a provider that will help implement SMS communication strategies when needed. Support should be available across a number of channels including phone, email and social media. A live chat option would also be advantageous for extra support. Additional support offers staff within aged care facilities peace of mind, so that this doesn't add to their stress.

Ease of use

The purpose of SMS applications should be to simplify the communication process. It should also reduce workload for staff and increase the scope and efficiency of communicating with residents, families and other stakeholders. SMS applications should be intuitive and easy to use, making adoption a straightforward process.

Integration with current operating systems

The best SMS providers will offer a few avenues for incorporating SMS into daily operations. These will include an online platform, email to SMS functionality and an API. Having an API allows customers to integrate SMS into their current systems and applications. The top providers will also offer Software Development Kits (SDKs) in multiple development languages.



Reporting SMS delivery results

It's important that the status of SMS messages sent can be tracked, so that aged care organisations are aware if and when their messages have been delivered. There is also the possibility of sending thousands of messages to numbers that do not exist. That's a lot of wasted money. Having the delivery receipts can help you clean data and escalate issues where the number fails.

Branded SMS

When identification is a big part of the screening process, branding your SMS messages with your organisation's name can be the validation an older person needs to trust the message. It will also give them a quick reminder of who is texting them, and why.

Experience with other aged care providers

As with any service, there is no substitute for the years of experience and expertise company can offer within a specific industry. Having this experience means that they can guide you in the right direction from the get go, and also will have come across many mistakes made by others so that you need not make the same mistakes.. Additionally, they will be able to provide you with many great ideas, on top of your own, as to how to use SMS within your aged care facility.

Esendex

Esendex is one of Australia's leading business SMS providers, 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 well over 20,000 customers. Customers have included many of Australia's most prominent aged care organisations, like Bupa Care Services, Calvary Silver Circle, The Salvation Aged Care Plus and more.

Esendex boasts direct connections to the major networks in Australia, guaranteeing an exceptional delivery rate. The Service Level Agreement (SLA) is committed to 90% of messages being processed within five seconds and 95% within twenty seconds, although this standard is largely exceeded, with delivery rates usually hitting around 98% and 99% within 5 and 20 seconds respectively.



Conclusion

Aged care facilities can vary in size and capacity, but their role is clearly important. Facilities should prioritise providing the highest level of care as possible, communicating effectively with residents, families and other stakeholders is vital in this task.

SMS provides a ubiquitous, accessible technology that both harnesses the potential for immediate communication, but isn't a brand new and daunting technology that will be difficult for older Australians to grasp.

SMS has enormous potential within aged care facilities to lighten the duties of staff due to the time-effective nature of the technology.

By maintaining a direct and constant connection between the staff of aged care organisations, residents, their families, and other stakeholders, text messaging can provide a greater overall experience, which is the most important benefit of all.

Questions? Get in touch



Call us

Sales: 1300 764 946
Support: 1300 764 990
Int: +61 3 9975 7940
Fax: +61 3 8672 6625



Email us

info@esendex.com.au



Find us online

www.esendex.com.au
[@esendex_au](https://twitter.com/esendex_au)



Visit us

Level 10
60 Albert Road
South Melbourne VIC 3205
Australia