

## ***Text-to-screen emerges; a conceptual approach to a powerful interactive marketing tool***

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### **Abstract:**

Text-to-screen is a unique form of mobile marketing that encourages active participation and personal freedom of expression at specific times and places. SMS messages are created and sent in the same manner they would be to a friend or family member, but instead of appearing on that individual's phone, the message is broadcast onto a display for all others to read. Although the concept and technology for text-to-screen have been accessible for some time, it has just recently taken off in terms of popularity and market adoption in the U.S. As a result, it is imperative that the mobile industry educate itself on the topic and more importantly, begin to identify and explore the questions that accompany its arrival. This paper explores the key steps for successfully launching text-to-screen mobile marketing programs.

**Keywords:** Text-to-Screen, SMS-to-screen, ticker, scroll, sponsorship, interactive marketing, moderator

### **Introduction:**

Taking the increasing demand of mobile marketing and text-to-screen as a given, this article takes a largely conceptual approach to the topic of text-to-screen with the hope of laying a solid foundation that can be used to stimulate further research and discovery in the field. To do so, the paper begins with an overview of the text-to-screen concept, the options available, and the logistics required in running a text-to-screen campaign. Using

these pieces of information as a starting point, the article then delves into examples of how text-2-screen has been used in the past and further, how sponsors and rights holders can capitalize on this powerful marketing tool moving forward. Finally, the article concludes with a call for further examination by marketers and academics.

### **Overview:**

The text-to-screen concept is a simple one. Individuals can create a text message with nearly any mobile phone, address the message with a common short code, and send it to a text-to-screen service. All messages received by the text-to-screen service are filtered and moderated, and assuming the moderator deems the message appropriate for the audience, the message is accepted and then displayed onto a screen. For example the message might be displayed on a venue's jumbotron (i.e. large in stadium monitor), TV screen, Internet site, or similar public display. Also referred to as SMS-to-screen, text-to-screen was first deployed in Europe as early as 2001. One of the original instances involved the City of Berlin and their 'Urban Diary' project. Mobile users were encouraged to send messages reflecting their political views, love letters or anything that crossed their mind and the messages were displayed on giant screens at the Alexanderplatz tube station (<http://www.urban-diary.de/urbandiary.swf>). In the seven years since, text-to-screen has become increasingly more widespread as it is now regularly deployed at sporting events, concerts, live performances and public venues all around the world.

**Figure 1:** Text-to-screen flow diagram

In every text-to-screen campaign there are essentially four primary components – a mobile phone user, a specified call-to-action, a text-to-screen application provider and a visual display. At a basic level, the mobile phone user simply needs a handset that is SMS-capable. Currently in the United States, 99% of mobile handsets have the ability to send a text message (Marriott, 2007). Further, according to M:Metrics, a mobile research company, approximately 43 percent of all mobile phone owners in the US regularly send text messages, which equates to 92.5 million people, with 41 million of that figure sending a text message almost every day (Neufeld, 2007). What is even more astounding is that these figures have grown exponentially over the last few years and they show no sign of stopping. Over 1 billion text messages are sent daily in the United States.

Clearly, mobile phones and their usage are on the verge of ubiquity. The second component is the call-to-action, the market message promoted to the audience in print matter, over a public addressing system, on the screen itself or any other traditional media channel. For example, the call-to-action might be, “text <your name> to 62701 and have is displayed on the screen.” The call to action must include a common short code, or short code. The short code is a 4 to 6 digit number, 62701 for instance, that acts like a phone number and is used for addressing commercial text messages. The short code can be cross-carrier, that is, it can work across multiple carriers at once, or carrier-specific. As with all mobile marketing campaigns in the United States, the text-to-screen program and the specific short code to be used with it must be provisioned and certified through each mobile carrier in which one wishes to have consumers participate. If multiple text-to-screen campaigns are being run on the same short code then a keyword, usually an

alphanumeric code such as the word 'SAY' should precede the message in the call to action so the backend application can recognize and route the messages to the appropriate campaign. For example, the call-to-action might be "text SAY <and your message> to 62701 and have is displayed on the screen." If one can afford to do without a keyword, then the call-to-action can simply become sending a message directly to the short code. Once the short code is up and running there are a few ways in which messages can be aggregated and managed.

The third major component of a text-to-screen solution is an application provider, i.e. a solutions provider that offers the text-to-screen software, including business logic and moderation tools. The moderation function is absolutely essential so that the content being produced by users can be previewed before being released to the screen. An automated censor can serve as a start, but it is not sufficient by itself as there will always be individuals who will attempt to beat the system. A trained individual needs to be reviewing every single message, which can be done onsite or via remote access within the text-to-screen application. In fact, no message should appear on the display unless it has been explicitly approved. Further, that individual should be aware of the sensitivities specific to that event. For example, the New York Yankees would not want its fans publicly criticizing George Steinbrenner, or one of its players for that matter. Or if Pepsi were an exclusive sponsor of a concert, the promoters would not want someone in the crowd to send in a message about the Coke Rewards program. This may beg the question surrounding first amendment rights and censorship, but when the campaign sponsor finances and provides the necessary means to launch the text-to-screen service, they are simultaneously reserving the exclusive right to use their own discretion on individual

messages. To further back up this claim, the owner of the campaign should always have a document prepared specifically outlining the terms and conditions of the promotion. The application provider will also have relationships with mobile carriers and messaging aggregators in order to receive and send the text messaging traffic from the mobile subscriber onto the display. The application provider, using their connection and relationship with a messaging aggregator, can help facilitate the sourcing of the common short code and the subsequent provisioning process.

The final component, the display, can take on a wide variety of formats ranging from a computer monitor, a plasma TV to a 4,000 square foot sign in Times Square. The messages themselves can appear as stand alone but the more aesthetically pleasing approach is to integrate other graphical elements on the screen. Typically a Flash interface is used for the final display but the quality can suffer when using a Flash-based application on a large screen or in a traditional television broadcast. In these situations a rendering machine with software capable of outputting broadcast-quality graphics in standard or high-definition is used to ensure quality results. The graphics for the display can be created in a variety of formats - full screen, lower third, side slab, shrink back or some combination thereof. One can also be creative in how they display the actual messages but a couple of popular means are a free form ticker, similar to the scrolling ticker one would see across the bottom of a CNN or an ESPN broadcast, or as a virtual chat room, with messages moving from top to bottom or vice versa. Think of the movie credits scroll as a visual example. It is wise to have some type of divider between messages so one can distinguish between the start and end of each message. The last four digits of the mobile number or better yet, the sponsor or event logo have been proven

options in the past. Other capabilities of text-to-screen can include altering the speed of the presentation of the incoming messages depending on the volume and inserting promotional messages – by having an operator either type them manually on the spot or pre-configure them to appear intermittently throughout the incoming SMS messages. For example, the Dallas Stars often display their ticket sales information every ‘x’ number of messages, encouraging fans to call and purchase tickets for upcoming games.

**Figure 2:** Typical text-to-screen display graphic

### **Text-to Screen Examples**

Using these four elements discussed above as a base, one can get creative with his or her individual text-to-screen campaign. Today, the most frequent uses of text-to-screen are at music concerts, sport matches and other live events. Although each destination can offer a distinct entertainment experience in its own right, all three contain overarching similarities conducive to text-to-screen. To begin, there is a unique and high degree of passion involved as all of the individuals present are self-selected. And more often than not they are typically gathered in one central location to witness their common interest. Screens then become natural extensions of the event as a means to amplify the entertainment experience. Add the requisite down time and all three are perfect environments for an interactive tool such as text-to-screen. In the past, anything that appeared on an event screen was essentially a one-way conversation. The video or advertisement played and people watched. At best, you could scream out an answer to a trivia promotion, for example, or you could call ahead and arrange to have a specific

birthday wish or marriage proposal appear. Now, compliments of the mobile channel, the display can become a two-way dialogue. The call-to-action is provided and fans have the option to respond and essentially play a role in creating and shaping the final product.

Sound similar to other forms of user-generated content?

### **Example 1 – Stadium sporting events and music concerts:**

Free form messaging is the most common application as it is fun and allows for the most creativity. However, some of the more successful campaigns include a more pointed call-to-action. For example, on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007, Txtstation handled the text-to-screen portion for Live Earth, a historic 24-hour music event that brought together an estimated two billion people across all seven of the world's continents to raise awareness about our climate crisis. U.S. viewers watching the worldwide feeds on NBC or Bravo and concert-goers at Giants Stadium in New York, Wembley Stadium in London, and HSH Nordbank Arena in Hamburg were asked to make a pledge in one of six areas in their lives to help the environment (Home, Job, Shopping, Traffic, Community, and Leadership). Individual keywords were associated with each area and upon sending a commitment, participants received two reply messages back to their mobile device – one containing educational content pertaining to that specific area and the second inviting them to join the movement publicly. By responding to the latter with their first name, last initial and city, their data appeared live in the venue and within the broadcast. Literally, millions of messages were sent and received and the event was considered a huge success.

### **Example 2 – Small Venues:**

Another realm where text-to-screen is being applied is small venues such as clubs, bars, restaurants, tradeshow, and hospitality tents. Companies such as Txtstation, Fantastic Media, FireText, and TextLive all offer text-to-screen solutions for small business owners. Common promotions include requesting a song with the deejay, flirting with others in the room, or posting a virtual chat room. Some club goers in Europe said it helps alleviate the difficulties of an initial personal interaction . Instead, they can display it publicly and use it as a tool to meet one another, coordinate a meeting spot, or decide when to leave. On the flip side, business owners can use the tool to sell sponsorships, push upcoming events and specials, and introduce spot promotions. For example, owners can fill their nightclubs on previously ‘dead’ nights by targeting key customers at the right time during the day and by using appropriate offers.

### **Example 3 – Public Spaces:**

Theoretically, anywhere a screen exists, text-to-screen can too. A screen can be defined as the external surface upon which information and visuals can be displayed and can include televisions, computer monitors, and electronic billboards – CAN we take out this definition? Seems odd at this point in the paper and doesn’t add much. The applications are endless as some other interesting uses include computer screens, office spaces, and public venues. Unwired Appeal, for example, allows internet visitors to send their SMS message in and have it appear live on their website (<http://www.unwiredappeal.com/text2screen.html>). Another application involves The Appliance Studio and a product called Txtboard, which essentially serves as an

‘oversized post-it’. The Txtboard can easily be placed on a wall inside an office or at home and it serves as a bulletin board for announcements, assignments, etc (O’Hara, 2005). Finally, you have public venues such as Times Square where you have a large number of bystanders and dynamic screens to engage them. One interesting example involved LocaModa, a small Cambridge-based company, as they created an application called Jumbli for Spectacolor’s Times Square screen. It runs twice every hour as people walking by attempt to spell out words based on a random collection of letters being posted. Players who submit the highest scoring words are able to witness their names on the screen (Tone, 2008).

### **Marketing Tool:**

The final song concludes with a bang and the thousands in attendance are primed for an encore performance. A generation or even a decade ago lighters would unite as they were held by outstretched arms. Enter 2008 and the general phenomenon remains the same but now concert fans quickly reach for their mobile phone instead (Turrettini, 2005). It is an anecdote that speaks directly towards today’s concert scenes but more importantly it alludes to the ubiquity, and the power, of mobile in our current society. Text-to-screen may only be one of the many emerging mobile applications but its potential as a marketing and sponsorship tool should not be taken lightly. Barriers to entry are limited, costs are low and the impact high.

Content owners and brands are constantly looking for new ways to activate effectively and text-to-screen is a perfect candidate for doing so. To begin, the graphic itself fulfills the traditional branding and awareness play. It can be customized to a

certain look and feel and individual logos and branding attributes can easily be integrated. For example, Above the Influence recently sponsored Jingle Ball 2007, an event that Txtstation managed and executed for Z100, New York's Hit Music Station. On a lower third ticker graphic the message read, "If you are above the influence, txt your message to 55100 now!" and then separating each individual message was their arrow-pointing-upward-logo. Such a graphic is equivalent to any other out-of-home signage, but one could make the case that it could potentially attract more eyeballs. A captive audience certainly helps the cause, but attendees are also naturally drawn to the graphic as they want to see what others are saying and when their message will appear. Beyond simple awareness, the logo placement and the customized look also accomplish the association factor that is central to the notion of sponsorship. The individual brand is instantly different than other sponsors as they are affiliated with mobile and a new application. Perhaps more importantly, they are enhancing the experience and not interrupting it, which is a very important axiom to adhere to when activating a sponsorship (Migala, D, Personal communication, January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008). Although some might argue that text-to-screen can be a distraction to the main event, a majority of the fans perceive the ability to send messages to the screen as something of value to them.

Branding and association only begin to scratch the surface as the true power lies within the direct marketing opportunities. Whenever a message is submitted, that user can receive an automated reply message straight to his or her phone. This initial message is extremely valuable as it serves as a direct and personal connection to the consumer. In fact, it should be viewed as the initial 'hook' to a more comprehensive mobile campaign and a multitude of other extensions currently available. From our vast experience of

running mobile campaigns over the years, we have noticed that text-to-screen regularly and consistently outperforms other types of mobile messaging – both in terms of higher overall response rates and a greater average number of messages per user. In stadiums specifically, the ratio of text-to-screen results compared to those of a standard vote or poll can range anywhere from 2:1 to as many as 10:1. Access is power, so with all else being equal, text-to-screen can serve as a terrific first touch point.

How the rights owner or the sponsor decides to utilize this touch point then becomes even more crucial with text-to-screen. The answer to that question should be based solely on the objectives at hand. If the goal were simply to test mobile and be associated with the application, then a basic thank you for participating might suffice. However, if a sponsor wishes to increase sales or generate leads, for example, the call to action can push individuals to a standard website URL, a mobile website (also referred to as WAP) or the traditional brick and mortar store. In addition, that same message could include a special offer, discount code, or a mobile coupon to provide further value and incentive. If mobile content were involved in the campaign, such as ringtones, wallpapers and downloadable applications, then a custom-made WAP page is a perfect landing site and distribution center. Branded content, banner ads, splash pages, images, etc. could also be included on the site.

Another strong mechanism that many are currently familiar with is text clubs, also known as an alerts program. Using the reply message one can ask the consumer if they would like to opt-in to a club to receive future alerts sent directly to their phone. The cost of the program and the frequency in which they will receive messages should be clearly stated upfront. If the content being offered is relevant to their interest and they perceive

the timing/convenience of the delivery to add value, then the opt-in rates can be astounding. An entire paper could be written altogether on the value and intricacies of mobile opt-in clubs, but the takeaway here is that a higher response rate by text-to-screen can directly translate to a growing mobile distribution list. This essentially places thousands of fans and consumers within instant reach, allowing one to further integrate his/her brand into the overall experience. This past NHL season the Philadelphia Flyers and Verizon Wireless applied this exact approach. At every Flyer home game, text-to-screen was displayed during pre-game warm-ups and later during the intermissions. The response rates were very impressive and Verizon Wireless wisely used the reply message as a mechanism to opt participants into their existing Flyers text club. Thousands did and they received timely score updates, injuries, and other team news throughout the season. Verizon Wireless, meanwhile, was able to extend their sponsorship outside of the arena and they did so while providing value to Flyers fans.

Perhaps one of the most attractive features of mobile marketing, and subsequently text-to-screen, is the tracking and reporting opportunities. The capabilities may vary slightly depending on the application provider, but the basics include mobile phone number, carrier, timing of the messages, and the messaging content itself. In addition to these pieces of information, it is crucial that a marketer ensures that concrete and measurable items are built into the campaign. For example, if one is driving traffic to a website or retail, then include a distinct mobile promotion code. In doing so, one can track the number of redemptions and really begin to measure the return on investment. It is important to note that each mobile extension mentioned earlier has the potential to be measured as well. For a WAP site one has impressions and click-through rates, for

content one has the total number of downloads and revenue generated, and for mobile clubs one also has total distribution as well as any other items that might be integrated into the messaging thereafter.

### **Conclusion:**

In the grand scheme of marketing text-to-screen is merely an infant, dating back only seven or eight years. However, within the mobile industry, this can be considered a lifetime. Although campaigns have been run in the past, text-to-screen is just now emerging in popularity due to widespread cultural adoption, ease of use, and its powerful marketing capabilities. Billions of SMS messages are sent every year worldwide, so all one needs is a compelling call-to-action and the technology/screen to display the messages. Once assembled, the real interaction and fun begins. And rights owners and sponsors are starting to take notice, and for good reason.

However, we should not stop here. The ultimate hope is that this paper provides a conceptual foundation sufficient enough for further research and discovery. Many potential questions are omitted from this paper but we should not be content with this fact. Instead we should persistently be asking new questions, especially as technology continues to evolve. For example, what other unique features should be added to existing text-to-screen software programs for the benefit of fans? How can the messaging become even more interactive or engaging? In what other creative ways can rights owners and sponsors further activate using this tool? How can they capitalize on the largely untapped market of public venues? From a technology perspective, what developments are forthcoming that could help improve text-to-screen? Are there other forms of messaging

or connectivity that could replace or substitute for SMS? Is there a similar application that can be developed for MMS messages or even video? The possibilities seem endless. Given the popularity of mobile and the power of this medium to marketers, it is in our best interest to keep striving for further knowledge.

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