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Growing popularity drives text messaging innovations

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USA Today
Aug. 11, 2005 11:08 AM

It takes the number of characters in this paragraph - just 160 - to flirt, avoid traffic jams, balance your checking accounts, help Africa and win a generation.

Text messaging on cell phones is finally taking off in the United States. It has been around for years and is a huge part of life in Japan and South Korea. But in the U.S. market, text messaging had caught on only among teens and "American Idol" fans voting for their favorites - until the past year or so.

Now this seemingly bare-bones medium - a message limited to 160 text characters transmitted to a cell phone screen for a few cents - is a raging phenomenon.

"It's clearly exploding," says Sky Dayton, co-founder of EarthLink who is now running a U.S. joint venture, SK-EarthLink, with South Korea's biggest cellular operator. "It's an example of how a medium evolves into something you never expected it to. Who knows where it will go from here."

About 5 billion text messages are sent a month in the U.S., up from 2.8 billion a year ago, according to the wireless trade association CTIA. But the real story is in the inventive ways this medium is penetrating everyday life.

Live 8, the global series of rock concerts July 2, generated 26 million text messages worldwide in support of debt relief for African nations. At U2 concerts this summer, fans can text their names to show up on a giant screen behind the band - and register to be part of lead singer Bono's poverty-fighting ONE Campaign.

Sports teams are starting to use "texting" to bond with fans. Hair salons can use it to remind customers of appointments. You can sign up to get text updates about traffic on your commuting route and weather in your hometown. Teen People magazine will automatically text you breaking news about such weighty issues as Scarlett Johansson's love life. At www.sms.ac, which wants to be the Yahoo! of text messaging, guys can sign up to get a new pickup line every day (SMS stands for "short messaging service," another term for text messaging).

Much more is coming as marketers wake up to the possibilities. "We're starting to see major brands utilize text messaging," says Alex Campbell, CEO of Vibes Media, which has helped McDonald's, Budweiser and the Chicago White Sox with text-messaging campaigns. "That's new."

It's also just a teaser for innovations to come, such as when text messaging merges with other new technologies - for example, location-based services that can pinpoint a cell phone.

A number of factors are finally converging into a perfect text-messaging storm in the U.S.

For starters, there's the sheer mass of text-capable phones out there: Of 192 million active mobile phones in the U.S., 90 percent have screens and can handle text messages, CTIA says.

"Mobile phones have become the third screen in people's lives," says Neville Street, CEO of messaging company Mobile 365, the other screens being the TV and PC. "But this one is more personal," Street says.

All of those phones, however, awaited a key that would unlock a texting boom: interoperability.

Unlike in other parts of the world, the U.S. cell phone market has multiple carriers using different, incompatible wireless networks. Just a couple of years ago, a text message sent from, say, a Verizon phone often couldn't get to a Cingular phone. The only way texting would take off was if it could be more like e-mail, reaching any device over any network.

Enter Mobile 365, the nation's biggest cross-network mobile-messaging-delivery service, along with some of its smaller competitors. Their services take in text messages sent from one network and transfer it into another, so any message can reach any phone. Now, about 45 percent of text-messaging traffic flows between previously incompatible networks.

In the meantime, many Americans have grown accustomed to typing on tiny keys using their thumbs. Speeding the process is a character-saving body of accepted texting shorthand: BRB means "be right back." TTYL is "talk to you later." (For a whole dictionary, check out www.txt2flrt.com/content/lingo.aspx.)

Cultural factors play a role in text messaging's surge. Teenagers have made it a routine way to communicate. About 63 percent of Americans ages 18 to 27 text message, according to a Pew Internet & American Life Project survey out in March. Those teens are bringing texting to their parents - or are moving into the workforce and texting with older colleagues. Now 31 percent of cell phone owners ages 28 to 39 use text, and 18 percent of those 40 to 49 do, Pew reports.

Now comes another element that will drive up text messaging: services that give people more to do with the medium than just chat.

At txt2flrt.com, you can sign up to use text messaging to help find a date. Fill out a profile on the Web, and then all you have to do is text the word "MATCHME" to the service. A computer finds a potential match and sends back a few lines about that person - but no names. Respond if you want to start a conversation, and the system will forward your message on to the match.

Some other emerging twists on text messaging:

- Texting to big screens. The most high-profile example can be seen at U2 concerts this summer. Bono makes an on-stage pitch for ONE and asks people to sign up by texting in their names. Audience members pull out their cell phones. As the names roll in, they are projected on a giant screen.

Look for the technology to come to sporting events. At some Los Angeles Angels baseball games this year, fans could send text to the scoreboard between innings.

- Practical texting. Since text messages arrive on a phone that you're likely to have with you all of the time, certain kinds of messages could help smooth everyday life.

For instance, traffic alerts. San Diego residents can sign up for the San Diego Wireless Traffic Report and get text alerts when their commuting routes are clogged. MSN Autos offers a text-message traffic-incident report for dozens of metro areas.

- Texting to sell. Unlike e-mail, each text message can cost the sender as much as 10 cents, and getting the message can also cost the receiver a penny or more. So massive spamming is less likely to become a problem. However, opt-in services - in which the consumer requests certain information - are catching on among marketers.

Major League Baseball's MLB.com, for instance, has developed a package of text-message offerings, including scores, trivia and injury updates, for \$3.99 a month - essentially getting consumers to pay for incoming marketing messages.

Proliferating possibilities

Expect the innovations to keep coming. Many of them will be imports of services already offered in Asia.

One of those is the buddy finder. "I think that will be part of the next wave - phones that are 'location-aware,'" SK EarthLink's Dayton says. A user can agree to allow the location of his or her phone to be seen by certain people or groups of people.

If a colleague is late for a meeting, call up a map on the Web and see where he is. At a big event such as a concert or sports game, you could program the service to alert you if anyone in your buddy list is there. The location-based service would be able to tell whether that person entered the area. Then you could text that person and make a plan to meet.

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