

Multimedia Messaging - a guide

MMS - Rich format messages direct to handsets

Rich Format Messaging

Since the first SMS was sent over the Vodafone network in 1992, SMS has proved massively popular with mobile phone users, out pacing forecasts year on year. Now SMS has become not only an accepted communication medium but the medium of choice for the younger generations.

MMS brings with it the same convenience and immediacy of SMS but with added features such as colour, audio, animation, and video, to deliver richer, more engaging messages.

This dramatic increase in message capability will bring with it new opportunities for communication and in particular for marketing campaigns.

Driving Creativity

Although SMS is limited to 160 characters for a single message, users have shown great creativity in formulating their own abbreviated language. This creativity indicates just how involved users have become with this hugely effective and personal communication medium.

MMS expands the possibilities and will drive even more creativity, ensuring mobile messaging as the communication technology for now and the future.

Whereas the average 160 character SMS message is approximately 140 bytes in size. A small MMS message would be considered below 30,000 bytes. At the top end MMS and can be successfully transmitted up to 350,000bytes, although in reality some network operators will restrict sizes to 100,000 bytes.

This vastly enhanced capacity helps drive the use of individual and combinations of different MMS elements.

MMS Elements

Text - As well as allowing a greater quantity of text than SMS, text can also be formatted using different fonts, styles and colour, adding personality to every message

Video - Moving pictures are now possible, presenting the opportunity to duplicate video content directly to the mobile platform.

Audio - MMS supports audio files meaning sound can be played either alone or alongside an animation or video presentation.

Images - probably the area most familiar is the ability to send picture messages. It's become commonplace to send photos taken on phones' in built camera via MMS. This element alone is ensuring the public at large are well versed in MMS capabilities. But images are more than just photos, and again combining images and text lends itself to advertising and promotional campaigns.

Animations - moving icons, cartoons characters, PowerPoint presentations are all good examples of items that can be animated on a MMS. The greeting card industry has already embraced e-mail as a medium for delivering ones well wishes, using it to enhance the offering with animation and sound. Ultimately it must also take advantage of the opportunity to deliver directly to the mobile phone.

User Experience

Although content capabilities are vastly different, as a concept MMS is similar to SMS and this is a key component when considering user acceptance of the service.

As with SMS, an MMS is pushed to a user's mobile device, and if that device is out of range or not switched on then the message is stored by the network provider and delivery retried until either successful or retries exceeds the networks policy.

Unlike mobile internet or content delivered via WAP push, the user does not have to wait for the download. MMS notifies the recipient once the content download is complete, removing possible end user frustration.

MMS messages are stored in the inbox of the mobile device alongside other SMS messages, and as with SMS, can be forwarded to their own contacts. Forwarding messages is now standard functionality on phones, and combining this with the richer content MMS facilitates presents exciting viral opportunities for the marketing world at large.

Aggregator Restrictions

Although network operators have supported MMS messaging for a number of years there remains a number of limiting factors that will concern content providers, especially when compared to SMS messaging.

Our investigations have found that delivery receipting is only offered by O2 and Vodafone. O2's platform is still considered a test platform and, Orange do not accept direct aggregator connections, delivery to handsets on their network must be routed through one of the other network providers.

Although these limitations are of concern to aggregators used to high quality SMS services, they may not necessarily be of concern to content providers, who will find the most significant limiting factor to be price.

It's difficult to gain an understanding of when the networks may develop their offerings to that of a similar standard to SMS but the lack of high and consistent volumes may be a factor influencing their decision making process.

Nevertheless, the presence of limiting factors does not constitute a failure of the system as a whole, the services are more than adequate for current demand and additional opportunities will open up as the technology develops.

Identifying Opportunities

There are some important case studies that provide an indication of MMS's application, its place in the marketing mix and its user acceptability.

BMW

The car manufacturer BMW ran a winter tyres campaign in Germany to huge success, reporting a conversion rate of 30%. They attribute this success to a combination of factors.

The message was personalised. By using dealership information BMW were able to deliver an image of what your car would look like with winter tyres on.

Timing was used to perfection. Once the campaign was created they simply waited until the first major snowfall of the year.

By localising the campaign the consumers were able to find their nearest dealership.

All in all, a perfect example of the power of MMS messaging.

iphone MMS

Although the iphone was launched without MMS functionality there quickly followed a number of downloadable applications that would collect and present an MMS message. These applications also allowed a user to purchase credit to send MMS messages.

Within a short timeframe hundreds of thousands of iphone users had downloaded these applications to take advantage of technology Apple has thus far failed to incorporate into the standard operating system.

With the launch of OS 3.0 Apple have included MMS functionality, whether this was due to the success of the MMS applications, or it was part of a formal development plan, we'll probably never know.

Future Developments

It's never clear what the future will hold for a given technology. Improvements in MMS service at network operator level will filter down through aggregators and raise the interest level of content providers.

In turn this should drive down price and no doubt spawn a more competitive environment.

Adding in the rise of smart phones and interest in mobile at brand and marketing agency level and we'll see creatives embracing the possibilities of rich format, immediate delivery, personalised messaging and its value as part of any advertising campaign.

Mediaburst and MMS

Although MMS compliant devices are now the norm and the technology supporting PC originated SMS has matured, MMS has yet to enjoy comparative levels of support.

Mediaburst have announced the inclusion of MMS within the same platform as its SMS services. Providing a resilient MMS Gateway from which content providers and aggregators can send MMS messages to UK networks has been the key driver.

The inclusion of two interfaces (API and e-mail to MMS) allows flexibility for both large and small business alike to test the effectiveness of MMS messaging to its client base.

To provide the same level of resilience and support the MMS service has been provided through the same network as existing SMS services. This takes advantage of multisite site hosting, zero redundancy platform, and industry standard hardware.

The key components to ensuring effective MMS processing have been the implementation of the MMS control centre and an MMS store.

MMS Control Centre - this is central to the efficient processing of messages and controls the flow of messages through the platform, deciding on the most efficient route bearing in mind current server load and availability.

MMS Store - While the transaction is processed through the platform the multimedia files are placed in temporary storage before being forwarded to the networks.

Outbound MMS Sender - This manages the sending of messages to supplier networks by looking at availability and current loads.

Conclusion

The inclusion of rich format elements into mobile messaging undoubtedly provides opportunities to deliver more engaging media than SMS. Moreover, as MMS takes advantage of the same delivery mechanics as SMS i.e. straight into the mobile phone inbox, it capitalises on existing user acceptance, and renders it one of the most exciting mechanisms to engage with consumers on their mobile device.

Mediaburst are fully prepared to make full use of the huge potential of MMS messaging right now and into the future.