

communiqué



tech talk by angelo fernando

If you text it, they may come

Talkers give way to texters as technology turns lowly cell phones into multidimensional communication tools

micro-blog defined

The web site SLTweets.com defines *micro-blogging* as a form of micro-content creation: “Think of it as the publishing of very small pieces of content on the Web. This type of content does not have to be text—it can be a picture, a URL, a bookmark, just about anything. A couple of examples would include del.icio.us (a text note and a bookmark), Flickr (some text along with a photo), or Twitter, which can have a ‘tweet’ (text and/or a URL that is less than 140 characters).”

creative uses of sms

Send-to-phone features allow a mobile phone user to tell web sites to send news, bank account transactions, traffic updates, flight information and local events to the phone via SMS.

It’s always dangerous to predict that one medium is about to replace another, or how one technology is about to rearrange our communication org charts. But considering people’s insatiable appetite for real-time information, it’s safe to say that text will change our world.

There’s something about mobile devices (formerly known as cell phones) that muddy the waters. They are a truly disruptive medium, or “platform” as they say in techspeak. Disruptive, in a good sense. Nearly 70 percent of the U.S. population has an electronic appendage today that untethers them from their desks yet keeps them connected to the grid.

The attention shift to this “third screen” (covered in this column in the May–June 2006 issue, when MP3 and video phones were all the rage) is entering a new phase. Mobile handsets come embedded with Web 2.0 features for interactive tasks, one-to-one sharing and engaging in user-generated content. It’s now possible to use these smart puppies in our pockets to conduct a search, blog or even micro-blog (see definition at left), make purchases, and inter-

act with kiosks, billboards and similar digital media. If I were to pick one, it would be the interactive feature of our mobiles that give them jaw-dropping communication power. Gone, it seems, is the lure of voice plans for constant chatter. One startling stat ought to put this to rest. In 2002, 80 percent of cell phone users in the U.S. were “talkers.” By 2006, that number had dropped to 42 percent, and texters began to take over. Among texters, e-mail from a PC is considered the new snail mail—something of a chore—whereas text can be used anywhere and can send an instant message to interact with other devices. Access and interactivity add a whole new layer to everything we do in PR, marketing and the media. It makes mobile the medium that closes the gap between the print and online worlds.

Trial balloons

In Europe, text in the form of SMS (short message service) is so common it’s used by news-

Europeans send four times more text messages than Americans, but the number of U.S. texters is on the rise.

papers, radio and television stations, and advertisers to get their audiences to engage with them in a two-way dialogue. Newspapers in the U.K., Germany and Norway, for instance, get commuters to compete in filling out their daily crosswords by texting the words to a short code, allowing them to instantly learn if they have won. The *Times of London* runs a sudoku challenge that allows readers to send in



communiqué

what's short code?

A short code is like a web address for mobile phones. It can be purchased outright or leased. The number 25669, for example, is the short code for Reuters; 30364 is for *Fast Company* magazine. To see how it works, send a text to Reuters. In the U.S., enter the numbers 25669 as the address, using the letters "TOP." In the U.K., use 84070 as the address and the letters "BIS."

mobiles rule!

- There are 2.4 billion mobile phones worldwide—more than there are land lines.
- More than 350 billion text messages are exchanged across the world's mobile networks every month.

Source: Mobile Marketing Association

by the numbers

20: Number of minutes U.S. college students spend sending and receiving text messages each day

Source: Harris Interactive study, 2006

52: Percentage of all mobile phone households today that have sent or received a text message

Source: "The Face of the Web" study, Ipsos Insight, March 2006

about the author

Angelo Fernando is a marketing communications strategist based in Mesa, Arizona.

their solutions to the daily puzzle to win a Dell laptop. Candy bars and other impulse goods carry similar short codes on their packaging for young people to sign up for special offers. Automakers target adults by offering test drives to those who text a number displayed in print ads. And in a decidedly odd use of targeting an audience, the British Home Office said it would pilot-test a way to send text messages to visitors who need to renew their visas—an effort to curb illegal overstaying.

Text messaging in the U.S. as a form of engagement and participation is still in its infancy. Europeans send four times more text messages than Americans, who use it for such things as television voting. It is now part and parcel of *American Idol* and *Big Brother*, where the audience votes for which contestants stay and which leave.

But there are ways to send this trial balloon to a higher level. Participation isn't necessarily involvement, and given a chance people will rise to the opportunity. Text voting for civic issues has been tried out in many parts of the world. For example, in October 2005, a town in Switzerland asked residents to vote on local speed limits. Think about involvement in cause-related issues. Not long ago, an activist group in India pressured the government to reopen a murder case by soliciting the public to send text messages—the digital equivalent of gathering signatures for a petition.

Another development worth watching is a service called

Twitter (www.twitter.com), the only phone-based feature that posts text messages to a web site. You could have a Twitter address with a simple registration that records your mobile number. When you send a text message to the Twitter short code, 40405, that message is posted to the web site. It can also send those micro-blog-like posts, short messages of 140 characters plus a link or image, to other users who sign up as your "friends." For now, it's more like a solution in search of a problem. But Twitter is quickly evolving and being put to creative use. A small group could all subscribe to each other's Twitter posts that serve as an RSS feed for mobile devices for people with shared interests.

Beyond browsing

Then there's the 800-pound gorilla called "search" that's never too far away from any device that's personal and portable. In case you haven't realized it already, you could conduct a Google search in North America on a cell phone without launching a web application. All you need to do is send a text message to the address 46645 (go ahead and type it in now) with a simple query, and you will get the search results via text within seconds. I use it to find a phone number or address when I'm on the road, but you could even Google demographics, weather or business information. You could type search queries in the message area that are general, say, "Citibank New York," or something specific, such as "population of New Hamp-

shire." You could even track FedEx or UPS shipments by entering the tracking number followed by the word "FedEx" (or "UPS") in the message area.

Another kind of search is coming to that small screen near you: the ability to search for deals in a mall. Retailers in a mall partner with a provider, such as NearbyNow, that lists their inventory and specials. The mall displays a five-digit code telling its customers to send a text message with a specific keyword (say, "sweaters" or "music"), and the customers then receive the names of the shops and the prices of the items they are searching.

We could easily apply this technique to noncommercial applications. Large organizations could use a short code that allows employees to pull information out of databases such as directory listings, HR updates, class schedules and other categories of information (you know, the stuff that gets lost on intranets) that we don't need to carry with us as hard copies or couldn't easily get to without pleading with a help desk.

Where is all this heading? The mobile device is definitely giving us as communicators and our target audiences more control over the timeliness and relevance of our messages. We have all been seduced by push techniques, with their promise of more control and "staying on message." But in the new media environment—defined by audiences, listeners, viewers, browsers and readers taking more control—it's the "pull" factor that will make anything we do more effective. •