A Buyers guide to choosing an SMS Provider

The 9 questions you must answer before you choose

FastSMS

The mobile revolution has everyone trying to cash in on the latest trends, including the growing popularity of SMS messaging. SMS providers are popping up everywhere, all claiming to be the best, the cheapest, the "only" this or that. How can you figure out which one is right for your company, cause, or organization?

By asking questions of course. But knowing which questions to ask is the key to finding just the right SMS provider for you. While there are many questions you could ask, below you'll find the nine most important ones to narrow down your list of reputable providers that might fit your needs.

Read through each question and explanation before starting your research. And now, without further ado, here are the nine questions:

How much does it cost to send 1 SMS message?

All providers define one SMS message as 160 characters. The base rate per one SMS message is usually listed on provider websites. When you compare between providers, make sure you're looking at the base price for a message in the quantity you plan to send. Prices can vary widely depending on the quantity of messages sent per month and any volume discounts that are applied. Just be sure you're comparing apples to apples and not apples to oranges.

Also make a note if the provider requires paying by "credits" rather than by message. This is a legitimate pricing method, but it can leave room for less scrupulous companies to mislead you to thinking they have a lower price "per credit" which may or may not translate to a lower price per message. Reputable companies usually charge 1 credit per message for local (within the UK) messages. Longer messages or international messages cost more and likely will require more credits.

Are there minimum purchase requirements or minimum usage requirements?

Some services charge monthly fees whether or not you ever send a message. Others will charge you a hidden or surprise fees. The best providers don't do either, but offer a pay-per-message pricing plan free of hidden charges and usage requirements.

When do the message credits, or your pre-purchased messages, expire?

Make sure you read the fine print of every provider to see if there are expiration dates on the message credits you purchase. Providers who don't use expiration dates usually advertise it openly so you'll know the credits you buy now will be good a year, or two, or ten from now. If you don't see any mention of expiration dates, read the fine print even closer. Chances are it's buried in there somewhere, and it probably isn't very long after you make your purchase.

FREE TRIAL

Do they have a free trial or account to test the services?

There's really only one good way to know if a service is all it says it is: try it out. Once you've narrowed your list, don't be afraid to sign up and test each service that offers a free trial or free account. There's no substitute for first-hand experience when it comes to evaluating a new service. Send some test messages, review their analytics tools, and whatever other features you have access to in the trial.

Using a free trial or account is also a great way to evaluate what kind of support you'll get. Are the people you talk with knowledgeable? Helpful? Or are they just trying to sell you their premium package and monthly fees? If your service call feels like a sales call, that's probably a red flag you shouldn't ignore.

What sort of network coverage do they have?

Your SMS messages need to be able to reach all your customers no matter what mobile service provider they use. Check to see how many UK mobile providers are supported. If you'll be sending internationally make sure the countries you need are on the list too.

Companies should post a very clear list or map of what countries and carriers are included in their network on their website. But if you can't find one, or you can't figure it out, call them and ask.

What is their network quality?

Network quality refers to the reliability, speed, and availability of the network used to send your SMS messages. Web-based SMS providers send your messages over the Internet for at least a portion of the messages journey to your customers. The best providers get the message out into the mobile network quickly, so it's delivered fast and with the reliability people expect of text messages. These generally are called Tier 1 providers, or providers who use Tier 1 network connections. Other providers aren't as particular and use cheaper routes and less reliable SMS gateways. This means messages can be delayed or even lost on the way to your customers. Quality and delivery routes matter. A lot.

If a provider says they use "economy routes" then just be aware sending your messages with their service will cost less money, but you'll be sacrificing reliability and timeliness of delivery.

What type of support is offered and how good is it?

Great customer support is always important. Even if you never use it, you know it's there if you need it. But great customer support isn't always free. Some providers charge for different levels of support ensuring only "premium" members have access to the best service. Others offer support free to everyone and strive to be the best for each and every customer. But on the Internet, it's hard to tell what's real and what companies just claim is true about their support.

Look for independent reviews either on the provider's website or via third party sites like Feefo. Read testimonials on the provider's website carefully. Do they say anything about customer service or are they all about technical topics? Absence of good customer service focused testimonials or case studies could indicate it isn't very good – or that they are a new company. The later may not be a problem, but if it's the former you're better off finding out now.
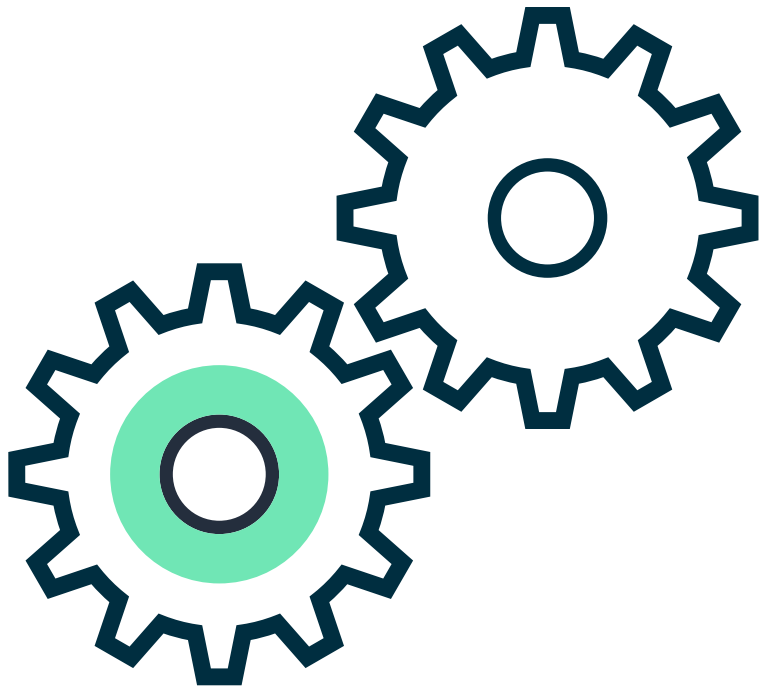
If you need it, do they have an API for easy integration into your software?

An application programming interface (API) allows you to integrate an SMS service into your existing POS, CRM, or other business applications. Most providers have APIs. The trick in the question is the word "easy". Research everything you can find about the API. The best providers give this information away free and are able and happy to answer your questions even before you have an account. Some providers may have already developed applications that will work with your software. For example, plugins for Microsoft Outlook are usually available.

Also find out what their development process is. Will future updates of the API always be backwards compatible? You don't want to invest in building a connection to their software only to have it break every time they do an update.
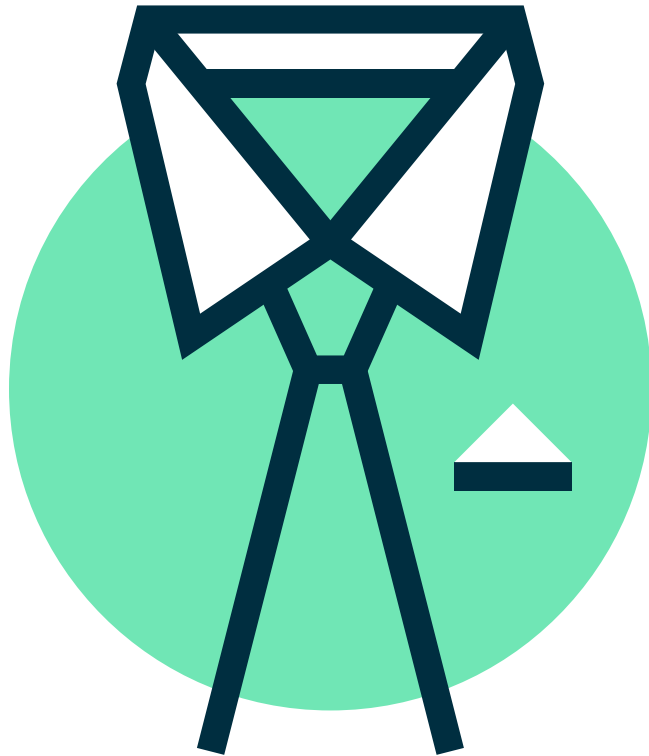
Can you specify multiple users or account managers?

If you have a team of managers, or administrative staff, it's likely you'll want more than just one person to have access to your account. Being able to assign sub-users and distribute credits between users is an important account management feature. Without it, you'll have to share the same account, login details, and credits with everyone. That makes tracking usage a nightmare as you'll never know who it was that logged in, or sent that message by mistake.

Now that you have the questions you need to answer, use the handy score sheet on the next page to start recording your answers for various providers.

SMS provider questions	FastSMS			
How much does it cost to send SMS message to a number in the UK?	Between 2.1p - 4p depending on volume			
Are there minimum purchase requirements or minimum usage requirements?	No minimum purchase or minimum usage			
When do the message credits, or your pre- purchased messages, expire?	Never			
Do they have a free trial or account to test the services?	Free account with 25 credits for testing			
What sort of network coverage do they have?	Global = 500+ networks in 200+ countries			
What is their network quality? (Tier-1, economy)	Tier 1 Direct UK networks			
What type of support is offered and how good is it?	UK Support via Live Chat, Phone & Email			
If you need it, do they have an API for easy integration into your software?	Fully documented API = XML / HTTP / SMTP / SMPP			
Can you specify multiple users or account managers?	Yes. Create unlimited sub-users			

About FastSMS

We're a group of technology and business specialists who love helping people. That's why we've made it our mission to create simple to use SMS services with clear pricing and always free support. You'll never find monthly fees, setup fees, or "surprise" fees with us. You only pay for the messages you send, and we're there with you any support should you ever need help.

Since 2002 fastsms has provided SMS messaging services to thousands of UK organisations of all sizes. We make it easy for you to send and receive text messages using a web browser, your email client or any application using our API.

Stop by our website to discover why companies like LG, BT, and Veolia trust us to be their SMS service provider. Better yet, click on our live chat and we'll be happy to answer all your questions.

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