

SMS Messaging Guide for Schools, Universities, and Educational Professionals

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How to use SMS messaging to grow your business while
saving time, money and aggravation

fastsms 
Delivering Your Message

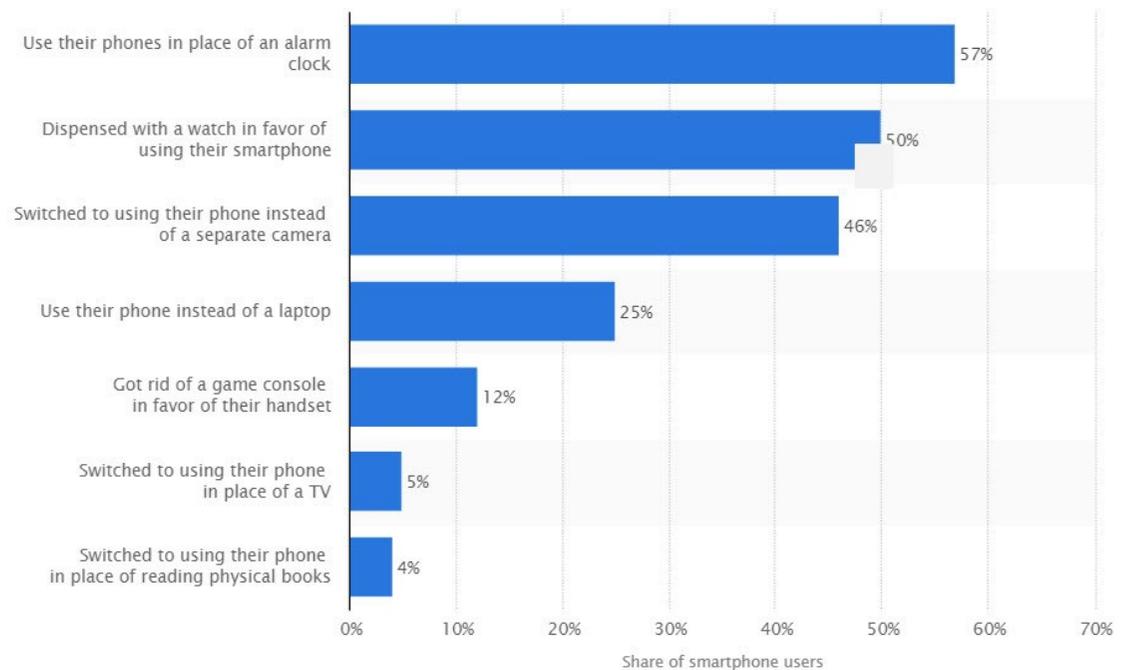
Why should you use SMS messaging?

When was the last time you didn't have your mobile? Chances are you can't remember (because it's never happened), or it was such a traumatic experience you'll never let it happen again. Either way you're not alone. A Facebook study in 2013 discovered 79% of people keep their smartphones with them 22 hours a day. We use our mobiles for all sorts of activities beyond just making calls, so we keep them close all the time. And the trend isn't just among a few lucky people with smartphones.



Ninety percent of text messages are read within the first three minutes of delivery

Selected devices smartphone users replaced with a smartphone in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2013



Additional Information
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Sources:
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In the UK, at least 92% of people own a mobile phone according to Ofcom. Sixty one percent of those are smartphones in 2014 and that number is predicted to climb. But every single one of those phones, even the basic phones, have the capability of receiving a SMS, or text, message.

So people have their phones with them all the time, and all of the phones can receive text messages. If you're wanting to reach out to people, there isn't a much better way to do it.

You can, of course, use email, or regular post. But when's the last time you met someone that read all their email? Or their post for that matter. Studies have shown that 90% of text messages are read within the first three minutes of delivery. Other studies show that more than 99% of text messages are read, even if at a later time.

Email and post are relatively slow too. SMS messages are delivered almost instantaneously, and generally guaranteed to be delivered within 10 seconds. Email can be that fast, or it may never be delivered at all. Yes, the Internet gremlins eat emails so they never arrive. Or worse, your email ends up in someone's spam folder and they'll never hear from you again.

As an educational professional, this all adds up to SMS being a great option to deliver timely information to your students, parents, carers and staff. It also means they can send you replies quickly. You'll be saving time, money, and have peace of mind.



SMS messaging is a new idea for education isn't it?

Over 12 years ago, a high school in Stockport faced a crisis. The school had less than 24 hours to inform 280 students they needed to return to school after cancelling classes for administrative reasons.

It was too late for letters, and calling that many parents was impractical. The high school turned to an SMS service to get the

message out fast and cost-effectively.

The next day more than 200 students returned to class. Over 65% of those students returned because of the text message their parents had received.

Today the same circumstance would probably result in even higher attendance given the growth of mobile phone use in the last decade.

Ready to start sending messages?

Hold on. Before you dive in, you'll want to decide how you'll use your SMS messaging to support your school. Here are some ideas on how you'd use SMS messages:

- ◆ Contact parents when students are absent from school
- ◆ School closures due to weather or administrative reasons
- ◆ Schedule changes for individual students or events
- ◆ Transport issues that delay arrivals home or pickups in the morning
- ◆ Emergencies involving a single student or the entire school
- ◆ Inform parents of reports being sent home
- ◆ Sporting event locations and times

Once you start thinking about it, you'll probably find many different ways you can use SMS to keep your parents, carers, students, and staff informed. Have a brainstorming session and see what sort of things you can come up with.



Now do the same thing again, but focus on your own organisation . Can SMS messaging help you coordinate internally? Could you send a text to a teacher letting them know there's a new student attending class? What about sending reminders about the change in the staff meeting location? How much time can you save by keeping everyone informed and current on events, policies, and meetings?

Now that you've had your creative fix, it's time to start thinking analytically. Get ready to calculate some numbers to answer the following questions:

- ◆ How many messages will you send?
- ◆ How often will you send?
- ◆ What is the total number of messages you expect to send per calendar month?
- ◆ Will your parents, students or staff be replying to your messages?

The answers to these questions will help you determine the cost of using an SMS message service. Most services use a pay-per-message billing format with discounts for high volumes. If you need to receive replies from people on your list, you'll need either a virtual mobile number (VMN) or a keyword rented on your provider's shortcode.



What's in a shortcode?

A shortcode is a 4-5 digit number used for SMS communications. While simple in concept, they aren't simple to get. A custom shortcode takes months, is expensive and requires negotiation with mobile communications companies. That's why most organisations simply rent keywords on their provider's shortcode or they use a VMN.

A VMN acts like a normal 11 digit mobile number except it can only receive messages from another mobile phone (or an SMS service provider's service). When someone sends a reply to the VMN, the service provider receives it and can forward it to an email address or their web-based service. The benefit is you can send and receive messages without having a physical device.

A special note about permission

SMS is legally considered an electronic communication. That means it's governed by the same laws as email, which leave room for interpretation. However, it's generally acceptable for schools to email students, or the parents of their students without explicitly getting permission first. It's assumed parents want to hear from their child's school.

So the same goes for SMS messaging. You can feel good about sending SMS messages to any student or parent that has provided their mobile number for communication.

Universities using SMS for marketing

The exception is for using SMS messaging for marketing. This would apply to universities trying to attract new students through a marketing campaign. In that special circumstance, where the messages are marketing in nature and not informational, you should follow the legal guidelines and best practices below.

In short, this means you need to:

- ◆ **Always use an opt in.** If you are using SMS as a marketing method to get new students (who are not yet attending) then you'll want to be formal about the opt in. You can promote the use of SMS to new students on your website, printed adverts or in email – anywhere you normally advertise.
- ◆ **Always include a clear opt out method.** When using SMS to market to people not yet on your list, you definitely should make sure an opt out is in every message. Make it easy for them to stop the messages if they want to. For example, tell them to reply with the keyword "STOP".

Here are some guidelines to make sure every message or campaign is as great as can be:

- ◆ **Tell your students, prospective students, parents, carers and staff how often you'll text them.** You're providing valuable service to your educational community, so they want to hear from you. But how often do they want to hear from you? You have a plan in place for the messages you're going to send (if not, go back to the "Ready to start sending messages?" section!). Share that information with your list so they don't complain if you send a lot of messages (even with good cause). Will it be once a week, once a day, or only when you have specific information regarding the school or student? Whatever it is, make sure they know.
- ◆ **Avoid using txtspk.** As short as an SMS message is, that's no excuse for using instant messaging type abbreviations. You want to be clear and concise, not cryptic. So even though you may be contacting youths you know to be avid text speakers, use proper spelling. It makes sense to do so in the educational environment anyway.
- ◆ **Always tell them who you are first.** Your students, parents, and staff probably have better things to do than to memorise your VMN or shortcode. In every message, make sure you start off by identifying who you are with your name, school abbreviation or something that lets them know it's you.



Clear Opt-in and out

How often

No txtspk

Tell them who we are

Now you're really ready

You've got your plans, you know the lingo, now it's time to choose your service provider. A quick Google search will tell you there are probably more SMS service providers than you have students. But they aren't all created equal.

Here's a list of questions you should answer before you decide which provider will best suit you:

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.

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 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.

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

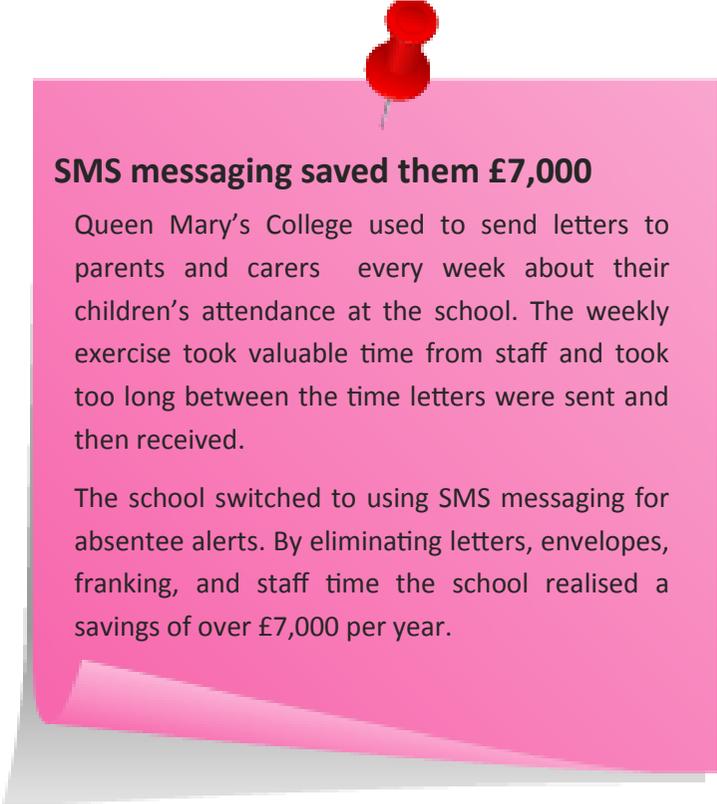
There's really only one good way to know if a service is all it says it is: try it out. Once you've narrowed your list, don't be afraid to sign up and test each service that offers a free trial or free account. There's no substitute for first-hand experience when it comes to evaluating a new service.

What sort of network coverage do they have?

Your SMS messages need to be able to reach all your students, parents, and staff 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.

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



SMS messaging saved them £7,000

Queen Mary's College used to send letters to parents and carers every week about their children's attendance at the school. The weekly exercise took valuable time from staff and took too long between the time letters were sent and then received.

The school switched to using SMS messaging for absentee alerts. By eliminating letters, envelopes, franking, and staff time the school realised a savings of over £7,000 per year.

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.

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.

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.

Can you specify multiple users or account managers?

Since you likely have a team of administrative staff and teachers, 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.

Get out there and send some SMS messages

You've seen the benefits of using SMS messaging. You've reviewed the questions and the guidelines for sending SMS messages and choosing a provider. There isn't anything left to do but get out there and start sending SMS messages.

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 24/7 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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