Taxi and private hire guide to SMS messaging
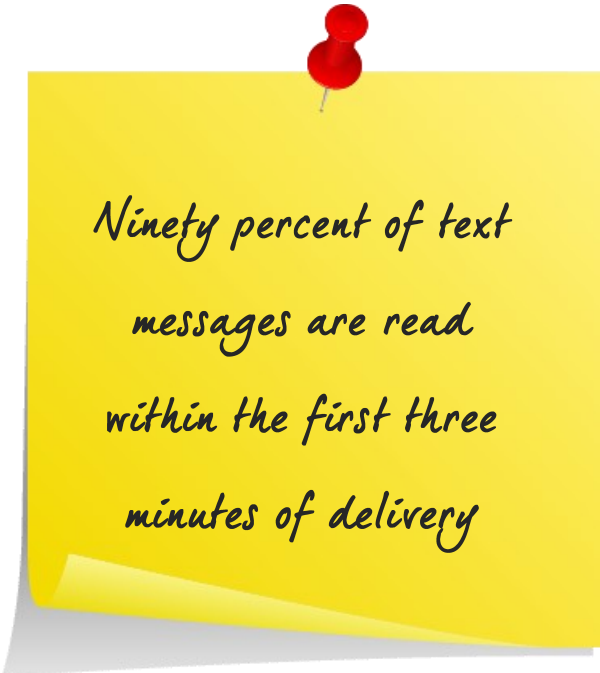
How to use SMS messaging to increase bookings and streamline operations

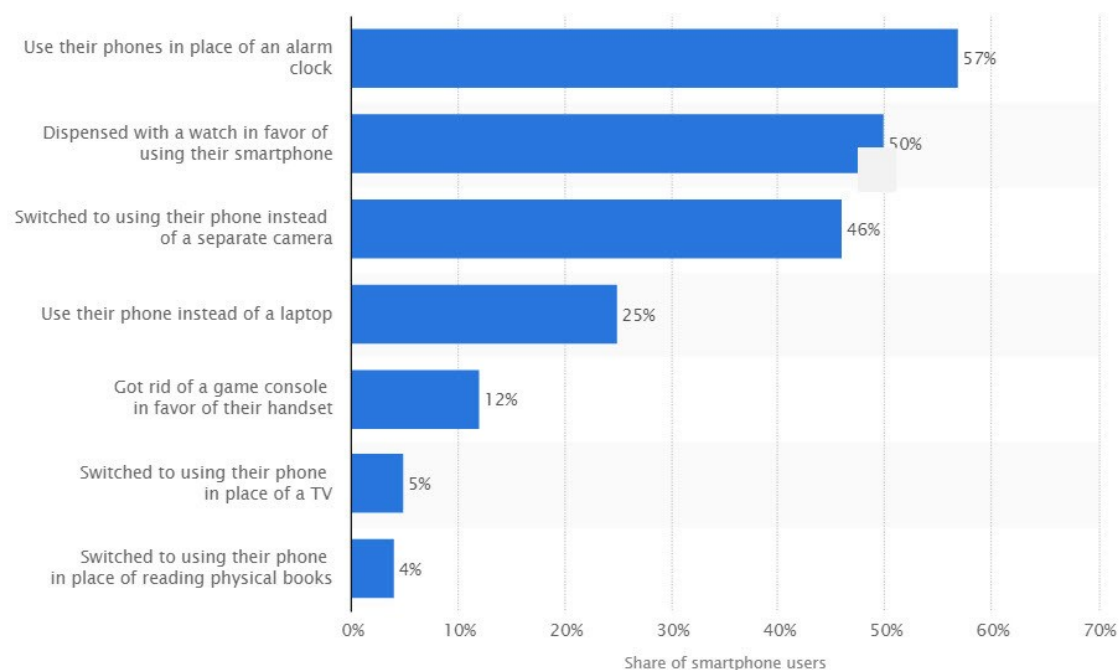**fastsms**
Delivering Your Message

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

Device	Share
Use their phones in place of an alarm clock	57%
Dispensed with a watch in favor of using their smartphone	50%
Switched to using their phone instead of a separate camera	46%
Use their phone instead of a laptop	25%
Got rid of a game console in favor of their handset	12%
Switched to using their phone in place of a TV	5%
Switched to using their phone in place of reading physical books	4%

Share of smartphone users

Additional Information
Sign Up for Account

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 a taxi driver, private hire, or radio controller, this all adds up to SMS being a great option to reach out to customers. It also means they can contact you quickly when they need a ride. You'll be filling those taxis so fast you may need more cars to keep up.

SMS messaging wins over customers

Taxi services are just fine the way they are. That's what Laura Keller thought back in 2013. She's a blogger for uxmatters.com, a website dedicated to helping people share ideas and best practices on creating great user experiences (both online and off).

She travelled frequently, so she relied on a call ahead taxi service to ferry her back and forth between the airports, hotels, and home. At one point she needed to find a new service, and chose a recommended company that also had a decent website. She called and booked her trip, but before the call ended the dispatcher asked her if she texted. She did, but the idea of using it for a taxi service made her uneasy. She liked it when she could talk to a real person when it came to business arrangements. But after a promise she would receive a text from the driver letting her know that he'd arrived (so she didn't have to wait outside) she said Ok.

That began her love affair with text messaging and taxis. Her story goes on to explain how, after a delayed arrival, she couldn't find her taxi. She texted the service and they immediately replied the driver would contact her. Seconds later he did, telling her exactly where he was and stayed in contact with her while she navigated the airport to his location.

Now you might think she'd be furious about the driver not being where she though he'd be. But there was a legitimate reason the pickup location had changed (something to do with airport regulations) and she appreciated the ability to be in real-time contact with both the service and the driver. As a user, or customer, the experience was so easy and made her feel well looked after. She's never used another taxi company since.

Customers want to get what they want with the least trouble possible, and they also want to feel appreciated. SMS messaging provides a solution to fit both those customer needs, meaning you'll have customers come back to you for booking after booking. What is the price of that kind of loyalty? Some would say priceless.

Getting started with SMS

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

Marketing

♦ Advertise special rates to existing customers during busy times or holidays such as Christmas and New Year

♦ Send discount codes to existing customers valid during certain time periods when they show the message to their driver

♦ Use SMS messaging to manage customer loyalty programs and incentives

Driver communications

♦ Confirm working hours or availability of drivers

♦ Send pickup details including location, time, and name

♦ Drivers can send confirmations to dispatch on pickups, drop offs, fares, etc.

Customer communication

- Receive booking requests via SMS

- Confirm bookings, arrival times and details with customer

- Notify customer of car details including colour, model, or number plate

- Allow customers to request their account balance then send them the details

- Send out satisfaction surveys after customers are dropped off, and even add a special discount for their next trip

Once you start thinking about it, you'll probably find many different ways you can use SMS to get more jobs and keep customers happy. 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 driver letting them know of a last minute job before they end their shift? How much time can you save by keeping everyone informed and current on driving conditions, car or pickup statuses, regulations or new procedures?

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.

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 customers be sending you messages?

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

Once you have the answers to your questions, you're almost ready to start sending. There's just a few more things you need to do.

Starting off the right way

You may have a list of customer mobile numbers a mile long already. Now that you've hammered out the details of what types of messages you'll send, you're ready to just start sending them out right? Not so fast.

There are some legal bits and best practices you need to know first.

SMS is legally considered an electronic communication. That means it's governed by the same laws as email. In short, this means you need to:

♦ **Always use an opt in.** If you're gathering mobile numbers for the first time from new customers, it's best to let them know you'll be using text messaging to keep in touch. If you have an existing list of customer numbers, you can send them text messages without a formal opt in because they've already opted in when they used your taxi services. If you are using SMS as a marketing method to get new customers (who have not yet travelled with you) then you'll want to be more formal about the opt in. You can promote the use of SMS to new customers on your website, printed adverts or in email – anywhere you normally advertise.

♦ **Always include a clear opt out method**. Even though you can technically send SMS messages to your customers, some people may prefer email or voice calls. It's best to include a way to opt out in every SMS message you send. 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".

Now the legalese is over with, here are some guidelines to make sure every message or campaign is as great as can be:

- **Tell your customers how often you'll text them**. You're providing valuable service to your list, 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 "Getting started with SMS?" section!). Share that information with your list so they don't get more than they bargained for by signing up for your SMS messaging. Will it be only when they take an action like booking a taxi? Or will they also receive more general text messages about special deals and discounts for future rides? 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 unless you're contacting youths you know to be avid text speakers, use proper spelling.

- **Always tell them who you are first**. Your customers 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, company abbreviation or something that lets them know it's you.

Be like Santa all year and stay on the nice list

Every kid knows the best thing about Santa is he always gives you what you want. When it comes to sending text messages, the best policy is to emulate Santa. If you send messages to people that don't want them, you'll end up with unhappy people. Just like the kids who don't get what they want for Christmas.

Keep your list up-to-date and you'll have happy people and you'll stay on the nice list too. Learn more about how to stay on the nice list by reading the Privacy and Electronic Communications (EC Directive) Regulations 2003. The EC Directive is the official document governing all electronic communications.

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 more SMS service providers than you have drivers and cars. 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 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.

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

"[E]mbrace new technology in order to compete … or go out of business."

That's the message in the May 2015 edition of the PHTM, the official newspaper of the National Private Hire Association. Based on a presentation at the LCT Show in Las Vegas, the article says that US companies are experiencing the same trouble as those in the UK: Companies with apps like Uber are taking business away from traditional companies. But that's not the real problem.

The more important issue is customer behaviour.

Apps and SMS messaging have brought "customer on-demand expectations into the business world." And that's "driving real change. People want service, and they want it now."

Like it or not, people are becoming comfortable using their mobile devices to do all sorts of business, including booking their taxis. Using SMS, whether integrated into an app or not, offers your customers the convenience and fast service they expect, and demand.

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?

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.

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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