



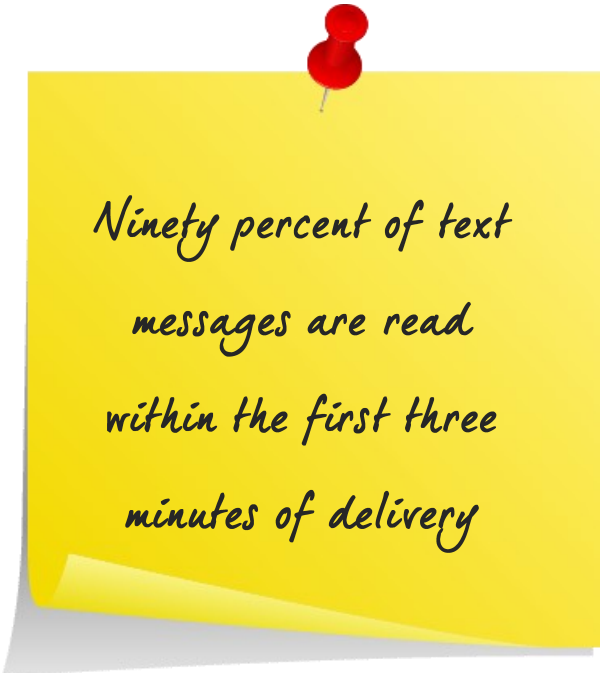
Travel agents guide to SMS messaging

How to use SMS messaging for marketing, booking, and customer support

fastsms 
Delivering Your Message

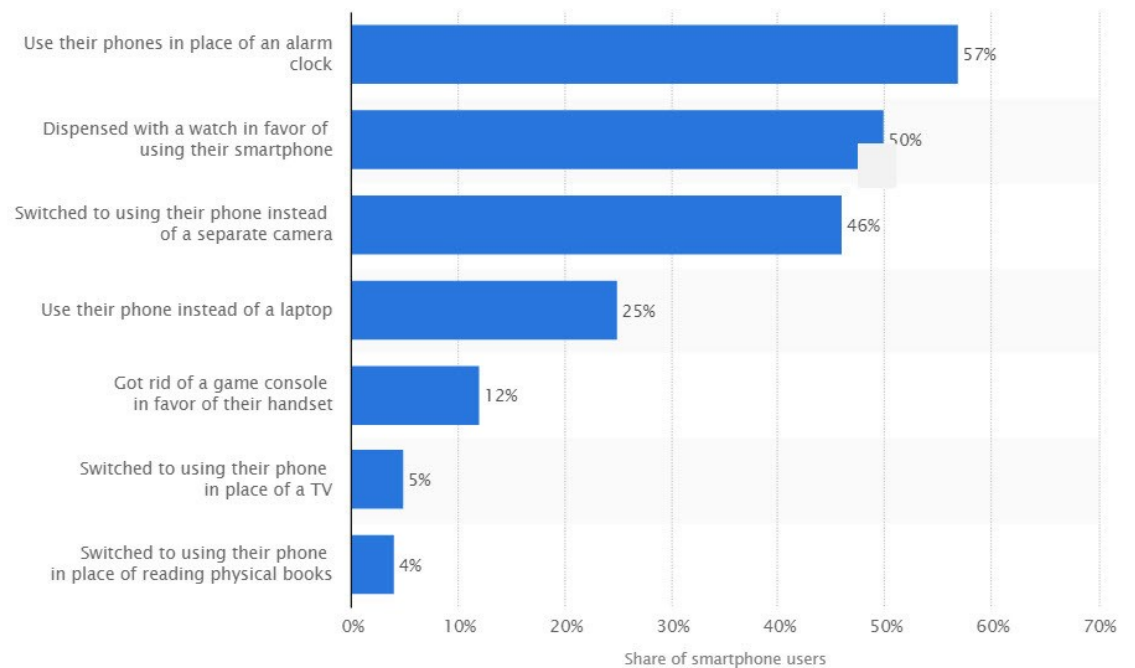
Why should you use SMS messaging?

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



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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 a travel agent, this all adds up to SMS being a great option to deliver special deals on trips. It also lets you offer extra services your clients won't find at the big online booking agencies. You'll be able to differentiate yourself and help your clients understand the value you provide when they book with you.



Take advantage of the mobile trend and increase your business

Travelers love their mobile devices! They use them to research, plan, and purchase travel. According to research by Digby:

- ◆ 44% of people plan trips on a mobile device (tablet or phone)
- ◆ 61% of people purchase travel on a tablet
- ◆ 51% of people purchase travel on a mobile phone

But the most amazing statistic is that 32% of UK travel companies have no mobile solution. That's great news for travel agents because it provides you the opportunity to start using mobile to get right in front of people in a way many competitors can't!

SMS messaging is just one component of a full mobile solution, but it is also one of the least expensive and easiest to implement.

Getting started with SMS

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

Marketing

- ◆ Send new trip offers to existing clients in one mass text, or based on criteria you set
- ◆ Offer loyalty bonuses to clients so they always come back to you for their next trip
- ◆ Ask for referrals via text message by sending a code offering a discount to the client when they forward the message to a friend who then books a trip.
- ◆ Use a keyword, virtual mobile number, or shortcode on your marketing materials so people can opt in to receive your marketing offers via SMS

Simplify the sales process

- ◆ Send quotes for holidays either in the message or with a link to view the information on a mobile friendly website
- ◆ Send passwords, account information, or website login information to help clients book quickly
- ◆ Send invoice notifications with links or instructions for payment
- ◆ Notify clients of overdue payments



Status updates

- ◆ Confirm travel arrangements to let clients know their trip has been booked
- ◆ Send transportation details for rental cars, private hire, buses or other related information
- ◆ Confirm hotel selections, room choices, activities, or contact information
- ◆ Send a message with a link to view the detailed travel itinerary online

Keep clients informed

- ◆ Send weather updates or warnings to clients before, during, and on their return
- ◆ Provide safety tips and advice based on the client's destination
- ◆ Notify clients of delays or changes to their itinerary so they can be better prepared

Once you start thinking about it, you'll probably find many different ways you can use SMS to communicate with your clients, streamline your processes, and to save time following up. Have a brainstorming session and see what sort of things you can come up with.



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, do the same thing again, but focus on your own organisation. Can SMS messaging help you coordinate internally? Could you send a text to an agent letting them know a client cancelled their appointment? How much time can you save by keeping everyone informed and current on promotions, sales goals, 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 clients 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 clients, you'll need either a virtual mobile number (VMN) or a keyword rented on your provider's shortcode.

Travelers use their smartphones to continue research even while on their trip!

Travelers these days are always using their smartphone, even after they've left on a trip. A report by Expedia breaks down the types of activities travellers do with their mobiles while on the trip. You'll probably notice quite a few line up with the sorts of things you could send them messages about while they are travelling.

For example, once they arrive send them a message with the address of the best rated restaurant in the city, or close to their hotel. Or



send a message with the forecast for the day. If the weather is predicted to be bad, follow up with a great activity they can do rain or shine.

Travelers are already doing a lot of searching for this information on their own. How thankful would they be if you sent them a message with just what they wanted to know? They'd have more time to enjoy their trip and undoubtedly will see more of the scenery rather than the glow of their smartphone. That sounds like a recipe for a happy traveller and a repeat client.

Starting off the right way

You probably have a list of clients 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 clients, it's best to let them know you'll be using text messaging to keep in touch. If you have an existing list of client numbers who've travelled with you before, you can send them text messages without a formal opt in because they've already opted in when they used your service. If you are using SMS as a marketing method to get new clients (i.e. who are not yet using your services) then you'll want to be more formal about the opt in. You can promote the use of SMS to new clients 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 clients, 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 clients 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 requesting a quote or booking a trip? Or will they also receive more general text messages about the travel opportunities? 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 clients 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 probably more SMS service providers than you have clients. 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 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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