



Friday, July 10, 2009

## Net Gains

# Text marketers aim to lower frustration for mobile phone users

By [Galen Moore](#)

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In "How to Irritate People," the 1968 television special written by British comedian John Cleese, an obsequious waiter (fellow Monty Python player Michael Palin) interrupts diners incessantly, fussing over every detail. Boston entrepreneur Josh Bob has had to figure out how to prevent his restaurant-business customers from doing something very similar. His company, Textaurant LLC, is building a short-message-service (SMS) mobile text marketing platform for restaurants. The software would replace some establishments' clunky waiting-list pagers with an SMS message: "Your table is ready."

After you eat, Textaurant will send you a coupon and an invitation to opt in for more communication from the restaurant – daily specials, promotional discounts, etc. – but your phone number and your full name stay hidden from the nascent company's restaurant clients. "The default will be opt-out," said Bob, who is building a prototype of the web-based software product with two other founders.

How not to irritate people is a hurdle that text-message marketing companies are delicately trying to negotiate. Three area firms, Textaurant, Boston-based Kaooga Inc. and Concord-based Helmsman Marketing, have different approaches.

If text-message junk mail is the last thing you want, you might be surprised to learn how many people don't seem to mind it, according to Kaooga founder Dave Everett.

At the Comedy Connection in Boston's Theater District, hosts make an announcement halfway through: Send us a text to win tickets to the next show. Out of a full house of 400, half will text in, said Everett, whose company is providing the text-message coupon software Comedy Connection uses. When customers text into Kaooga's special offers at live events or in magazines, the software grabs their numbers for use in a marketing database.

Kaooga's clients, which include the department store Bloomingdale's and the hamburger chain Fuddruckers, follow up promotions like that with text-message coupon offers. An opt-out is available, but Everett said only 2 percent to 3 percent of recipients choose that option.

The messages don't go out to a spam list, he said. Text-message promotion ads appear only in catalogs people are reading, or settings they already frequent. For customers looking for discounts, Everett believes Kaooga is more of a service than a nuisance.

Each text message provides promotional codes for discounts customers would otherwise have to clip coupons to get. They can use the code on-premise or online — and that makes it easier for regular customers to find deals, he said.

Any SMS message from a company ought to provide a service that customers will want, said Jim Jackson, who is CFO at Helmsman Marketing. The company is getting ready to launch a software application that manages the timing of a series of messages in a marketing campaign or service — via fax, postal service, e-mail and text message. Text messages are the trickiest, said Jackson. It's an intimate medium, and not an effective way to send someone junk mail, he said.

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Helmsman's software is used by insurance agents, software resellers and heating oil distributors. The company's strategy has been to identify industries that have large numbers of small- to medium-size businesses operating under similar models. Helmsman's software identifies the pattern and timing of messages that will most effectively accomplish an objective like reminding an insurance customer to renew his or her vehicle registration.

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"SMS, in my view, is not necessarily a positive direct-marketing vehicle in terms of people you don't know," he said. "It's phenomenal for customer service."

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Posted by: simowner70@g... / Friday, July 10th, 2009 - 1:16 pm EDT

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