

Does SMS Text Messaging Make Sense for Health Clubs?

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What's the SMS Buzz All About?

As we witness the ever-increasing number of people texting on their phones and continue to hear the drumbeat of mobile marketing, we really begin to question whether short message texting (SMS) is something health club management needs to look at more seriously. The bigger question should be how would this new medium help increase membership and retention, or even assist in the operation of your club?

SMS is on nearly every phone in the United States that supports texting capability. Trillions of texts are sent every year, and it's now the largest mobile marketing channel by revenue. More importantly, 98 percent of SMS messages sent are opened, and 83 percent of them are opened within three minutes. There is clearly a marketing opportunity behind texting, but how can the health club industry take advantage of it?

SMS campaigns are only effective if you're texting the people who want to hear from you and if you're providing content they're interested in. So, it makes sense to use SMS as a means of communicating with your most engaged customers because they have a proven interest in what your club has to offer. Payment solution companies now have embraced SMS and have integrated the technology into their health club software systems. Several features that specifically benefit clubs in reaching members and prospects alike include:

- *New member welcome alerts*
- *Birthday alerts*
- *Attendance or non-attendance alerts*
- *Personal trainer schedule reminder*
- *Member schedule reminder*
- *Member renewal reminder*
- *Lead generation*
- *Product promotions and coupon offers*

Prospecting with SMS

Like with any marketing campaign, prospecting for new club members with SMS should be viewed as another tool in the tool box and not be the end-all method to bring in more members. No one marketing tool will do that, and besides, we all know it's a game of attrition that requires a constant presence in the marketplace that creates multiple impressions from various sources (or tools). With that said, and despite the hype over SMS, it ultimately comes down to good face-to-face selling to a prospective member. However, one of the bullet points listed above is lead generation and that's most successful when leveraged with multiple touch points, or impressions. Generally speaking, text messaging's best-known value is that it's a "real-time" or immediate method of communication. Many in the marketing and advertising field believe it should be promoted through an integrated campaign that includes social media, e-mail marketing, a dynamic website and more.

In a recent Direct Marketing Association survey, 70 percent of those surveyed said that they responded to a marketing text message from a product or service company, and 30 percent responded to e-mail marketing. So, why are consumers responding more to a text than an email? Thanks to the younger generation, we've discovered a more immediate and personal way to share information with one another through texting. SMS marketing is attempting to use that immediacy as another tool that motivates their audience to act on an offer, discount, etc. So, the goal is to personally engage your prospects and at the same time include relevant content along with a call to action. Think about it: you have 160 characters to be relevant, compelling and at the same time try to lead them to a personal interaction.

Prospecting and lead generation doesn't come easy without putting the work into it. Purchasing a text list with opt-in or permission to receive SMS texts

isn't an option – mobile phone number privacy is still a priority in the United States. To build opt-in leads, club operators have included web forms on their website landing pages and have even posted on social media sites with offers such as a free 30-day trial. When the recipient fills out the form, including their mobile phone number, they've automatically opted-in. Club operators have also created online banner ads where an incentive is offered if a prospect texts to a specific number or uses a short code from the ad. When club operators receive the prospect's text, they also get an opt-in or consent to receive future texts using the prospect's mobile number.

Where's the Value Add for Health Clubs?

With more than 250 million phones being used in the United States and most of them having SMS capability, nothing else can match this audience reach. The cost of text messaging with even a mass texting campaign is inexpensive. So, what does this mean for health club operators? First and foremost, getting that prospect into the club by way of an incentive allows for the best sales opportunity – a personal interaction. Once prospects become members, gym management gains instant control in membership communications if they're set up with their members' mobile numbers. Incidentally, the club's staff should be actively asking for all prospects' and members' mobile numbers; and, if the club is using the proper health club management software, those numbers will be automatically added to their SMS list. A good example of using the SMS list is sending text reminders to members who haven't been to the club in a while. This adds value to the club/member relationship by creating member loyalty when the club recognizes a member's absence and takes the time to communicate to the member individually. Members can also receive incentive offers for friends and family referrals. From a club operations perspective, SMS is a big time-saver because of the immediacy of texts. Club staff is not having to track down people when they text schedule reminders for trainers or text members with upcoming club events and activities. In terms of marketing engagement capabilities, club staff can text members about sales promotions and coupons on club products.

The Final Word

SMS text messaging can be leveraged effectively for the health club business if it's used to communicate relevant information. More importantly, it can build a rapport with prospects and members that leads to personal interaction. Its value with member awareness can be seen through the various text alerts and reminders that create an immediate connection, as well as a better communication between the club and its members. On a much broader marketing landscape, selling club memberships is a tougher task unless you can take the time to build an opt-in phone list using the methods previously described. Even with a good list, new membership texts should be part of a larger marketing campaign that uses multiple touch points. These texts should also include incentives that lead to a personal interaction. SMS marketing will continue to grow and can be a first step towards developing greater relationships with your prospects and members.

BIO

Stephen Wilson is the marketing manager at ASF Payment Solutions and a veteran of marketing and advertising. Wilson founded two advertising/public relation agencies in Washington, DC, and Denver. As a director of creative development, he has focused on branding and strategic communications and has worked in the health and wellness industry for more than 20 years. His work on national marketing and advertising campaigns has earned him numerous accreditations and awards. For more information, e-mail steve.wilson@asfpaymentsolutions.com, or visit www.asfpaymentsolutions.com for more information on products and services from ASF Payment Solutions.