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How to Leverage SMS in Outreach Strategies

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Introduction

Digital government has provided agencies with the tools and philosophical shifts to better connect with communities and help serve their needs. One way the digital revolution in government communications is significant is the ability to deliver messaging through multiple channels, moving beyond websites to include options like social media and SMS/text messaging.

This move towards alternative outreach methods not only provides a cost-effective way to increase the inclusivity of outreach but also encourages greater interaction as messages are reaching audiences where they are most likely to see them and act. In fact, the *general public* has grown increasingly reliant on mobile devices over the last decade, in turn pushing the urgency for government to adapt accordingly.

For vulnerable populations, mobile–friendly government communications are a necessity as *1 in 4 low income individuals* rely solely on smart phones for digital access.

While many government organizations have yet to realize the benefits of SMS messaging, some are embracing it as evidenced by an 11% increase between 2021 and 2022.

This guide demonstrates benefits of SMS messaging for state and local communicators, and provides a blueprint for implementing messages into existing communications and outreach strategies. Equipped with the tips and samples provided in this guide, agencies can move towards effectively integrating SMS messaging into their plans and broaden the impact of their strategies.

Change in State & Local Agency Use of SMS

2021 2022

353

394

0 50 100 150 200 250 300 350 400 450

SMS MESSAGES (MILLIONS)
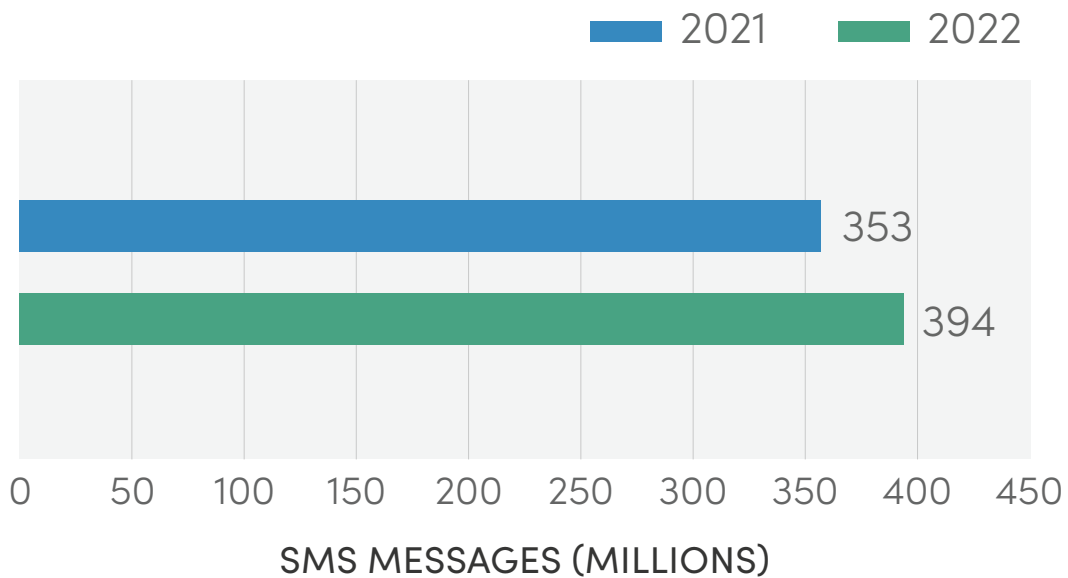
Building SMS/Text Messaging Strategies into Communications Plans

Some organizations may be hesitant to implement new communications methods like SMS due to a misconception that it will require new or unproven tactics and tools. Thanks to digital tools that incorporate broadcast to SMS/text channels, such as those built by Granicus, multi-channel execution is easier than ever before.

Just as any other technology or platform has evolved to increase ease-of-use, strategic use of those tools follows suit – and SMS/text is no different.

The following steps for building SMS/text messaging strategies into a communication plan may seem familiar. In fact, for any communications team prioritizing strategic planning, SMS/text messaging is a non-burdensome, unique tool for communicators to leverage.
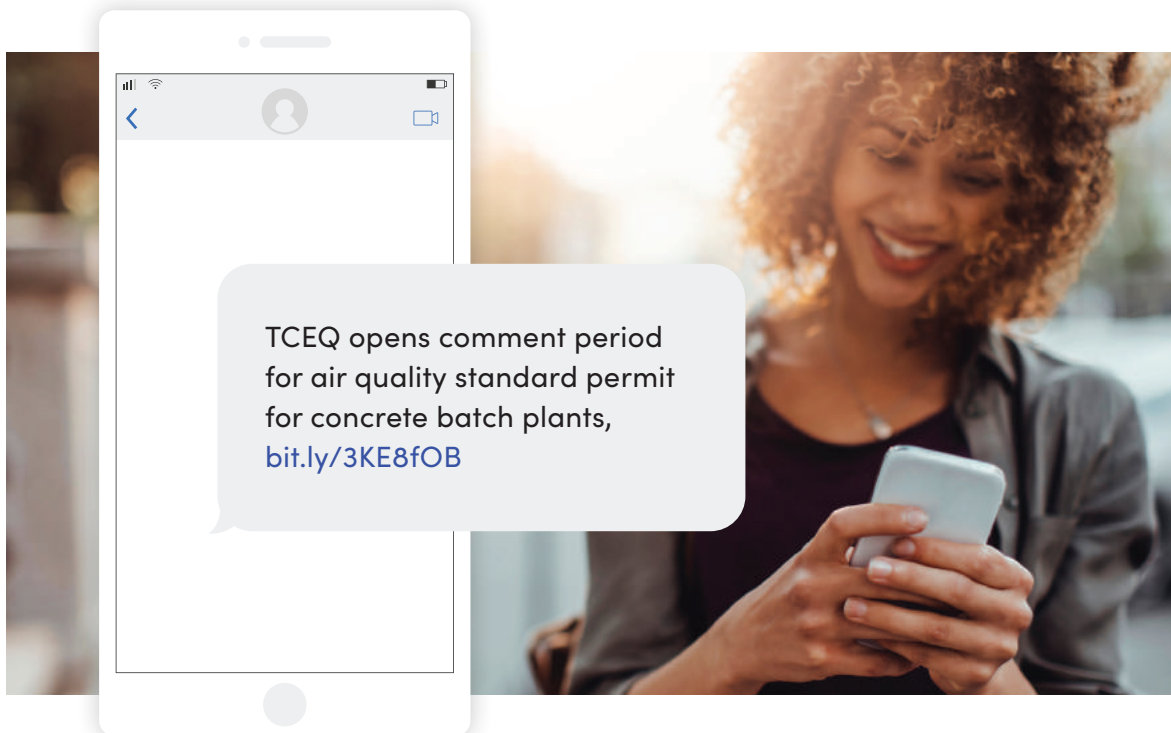
Seek Input and Evaluate Options

Programs can help maximize the impact of their SMS messaging by seeking and incorporating input from community members and program staff when developing messaging strategy and content. Based on existing feedback and collaborative planning, the content, format, and timing of messages can be more impactful and align with desired results.

Because communicators leveraging SMS/text and other targeted communications are the curators of the public's personal information, it's imperative that the tools used are secure and adhere to necessary compliance requirements.
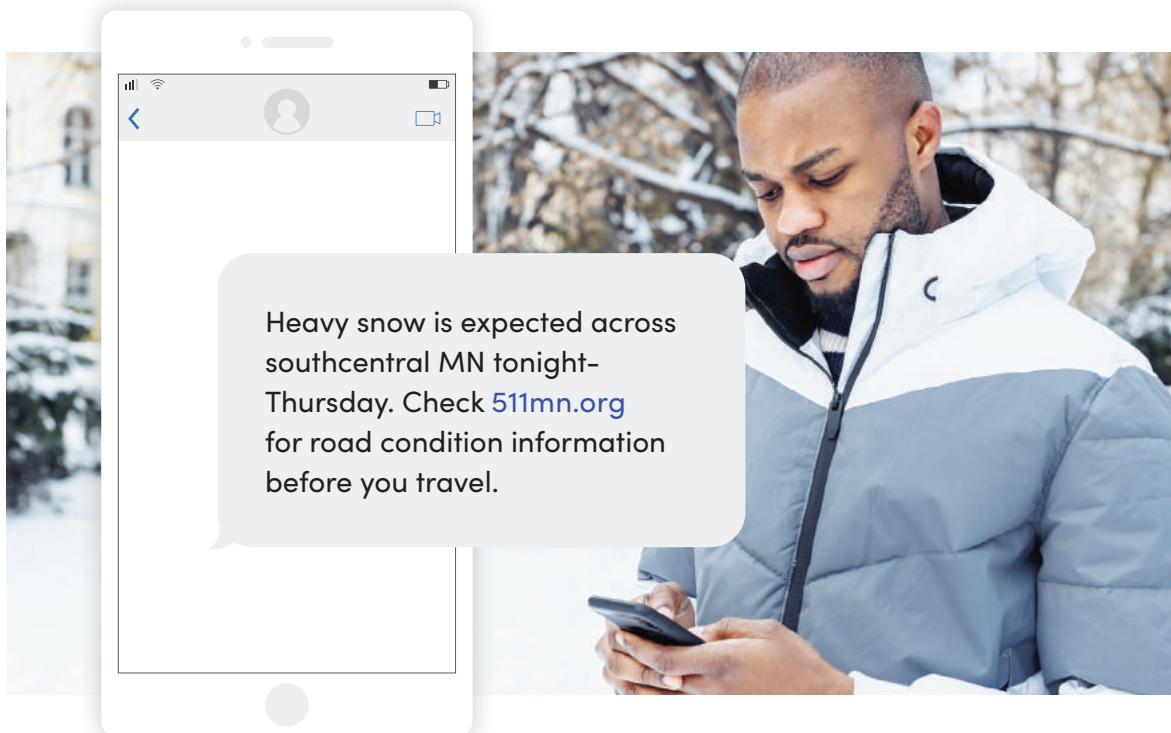
Granicus' govDelivery capability is authorized at the FedRAMP moderate level and used by over 2,400 agencies to send email and SMS communications.

TCEQ opens comment period for air quality standard permit for concrete batch plants, bit.ly/3KE8fOB

Understand and Develop Audience Segments

As with any communications strategy, increased audience segmentation allows for more targeted messaging. While it may seem that segmentation is baked in, effective SMS/text messaging requires a deeper look at the various audiences benefiting from the entire communications strategy. A communicator should look at their audiences and ask some basic questions to develop a tailored plan that considers the individuals' journey.

Who would benefit most from the information being sent out? Who has already received communications on this topic? Effective text messaging reflects individual needs, preferences, goals, motivations, and constraints. Learning about demographic, socioeconomic, and even family characteristics, if possible, can help better target messaging. Much of this data is collected from users during the enrollment process.

Heavy snow is expected across southcentral MN tonight–Thursday. Check 511mn.org for road condition information before you travel.

Know the Types of SMS Messages

Any new form of communications, such as SMS/text, should be integrated to complement and support the goals of existing strategies for maximum message saturation. While SMS/text may require more concise content than other communications tactics, there are a variety of ways it can be integrated into existing campaign messaging. Understanding the types of common SMS/text messages will make it easy to use existing campaign messaging in a targeted, direct, and personal way for users to easily understand the importance of your messages and encourage participation. Any type of SMS message can be optimized for interactivity. Understanding these common message categories, however, will help narrow focus and targeting:

Call to Action

Imperative messages that get people to take action, such as a sign-up link or calling a phone number for more information. These messages encourage communicators to focus on the immediate need for action, but also clarify the benefit for taking action or the lost opportunity for inaction.

Subscription Benefits

Understanding the topics that spark interest can also lead to increased subscription rates. By using a text-to-subscribe message within outreach messages, individuals are compelled to subscribe directly from the text message to continue receiving valuable related information. This opt-in method increases future engagement and reflects positively on the agency.

Reminders

Automated text reminders of important dates and deadlines are a targeted way to increase participation in programs and encourage users to keep program requirements front of mind. This can also help deepen the relationship between the agency and the user, reaffirming the agency as a necessary service provider.
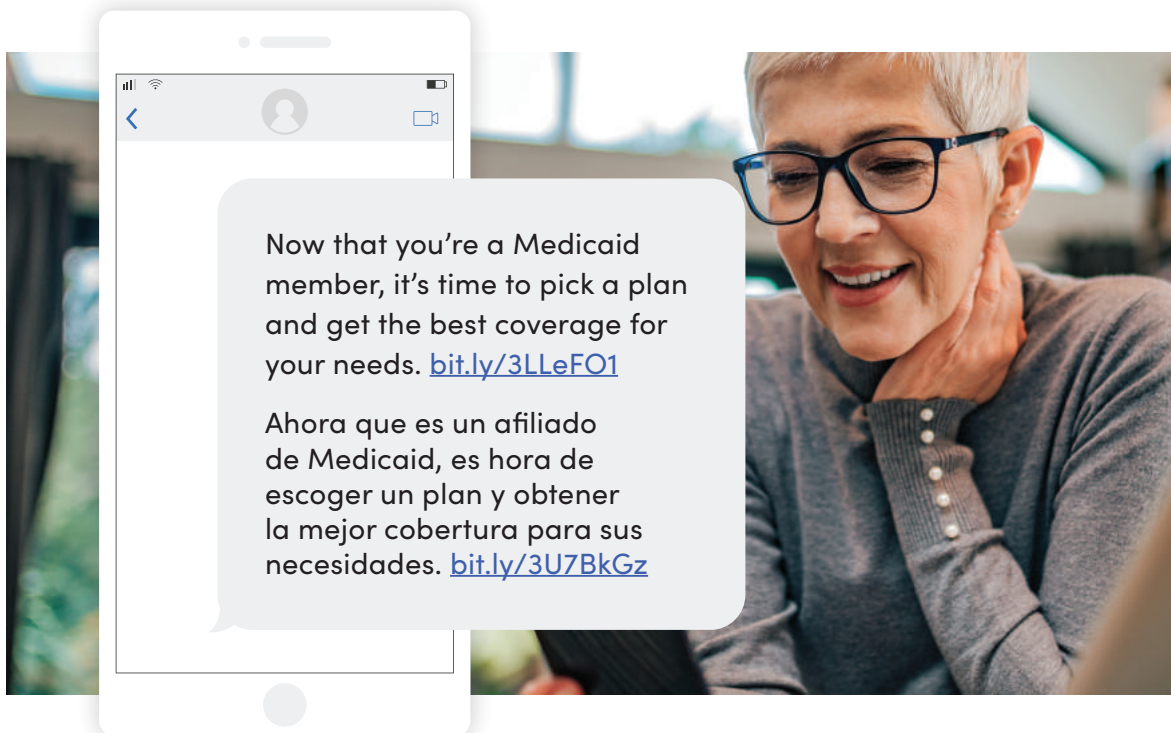
Promotional

Promotional messages inform citizens with program details that may not require immediate action. This can include program benefits or overviews of services. Promotional messages can be used to encourage users to request more information on a website or external resource, reaffirming the agency as a necessary service provider.

Understand Tone and Language Differences

SMS messaging presents a unique channel for engagement largely due to the context in which users interact with messaging. Messages are received in a personal space offering a differing experience from sitting down at a computer and conducting research on a website. Because of this change in dynamic, the tone and the content of the messaging must be reflective of that more intimate experience. Personalizing messages can boost engagement and reaffirm intent.
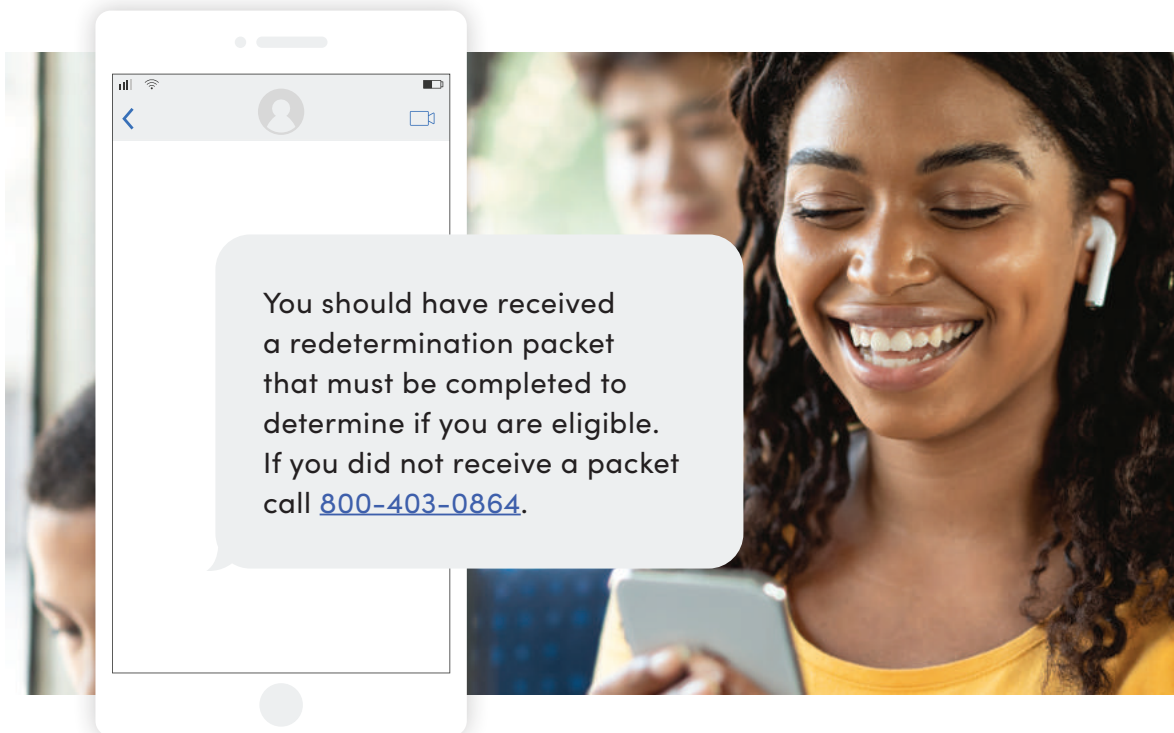
Messages should be concise (within 160 characters) and use plain, understandable language. Recipients should be able to quickly comprehend the message to better facilitate an experience respectful of their time. Focus on including essential information and be clear about what next steps, if any, need to be taken. Simple reminders about deadlines, event locations, or links to additional resources are effective ways to encourage engagement, as well.

Now that you're a Medicaid member, it's time to pick a plan and get the best coverage for your needs. bit.ly/3LLeFO1

Ahora que es un afiliado de Medicaid, es hora de escoger un plan y obtener la mejor cobertura para sus necesidades. bit.ly/3U7BkGz

Be Intentional with Timing and Delivery Cadence

One of the important factors that keeps targeted SMS/text campaigns from becoming spam is respect to timing and delivery frequency of messaging. Being intentional with when and how often messages are sent is a critical factor in a SMS/text strategy. Reminders should be well timed, so they are delivered close to an upcoming related event or deadline. In determining when to send a reminder, consider the time it will take to complete any necessary actions. For example, users may need to gather materials for a deadline or secure childcare for an upcoming workshop and would benefit from a timely reminder. Reminders sent too far in advance, however, may lead to inaction or a lower rate of engagement. This balance reaffirms the need to under audience segments with consideration to work, school, and sleep schedules that may impact when messages are most likely to be received and engaged with.

You should have received a redetermination packet that must be completed to determine if you are eligible. If you did not receive a packet call 800-403-0864.

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Track and Assess

As with other communication strategy planning, analysis is a major factor for determining success in a SMS/text plan. Assessment can be as simple as noting whether enrollments increased in a specific timeframe after messaging was deployed. Digital tools, such as approved URL shorteners, can also help with analytics tracking when SMS/text includes a URL. When developing an overall communications strategy about program enrollment awareness, inclusion of methods to track and measure effectiveness are critical for current and future campaigns. If necessary, assessment can also take place after a campaign using focus groups or follow-up surveys. These can help provide insight into the effectiveness of messaging or reminders.

Conclusion

SMS messaging provides government organizations a way to broaden their public engagement channels in a way that can prompt immediate action, increase awareness, and strengthen relationships and trust. Multi-channel communication strategies increase efficacy because of flexible, diverse messaging capable of reaching communities that may be left behind by less equitable channels. When done properly, SMS overcomes the assumption of spam, becoming a critically important tactic that can impact specific audience segments. Thanks to digital communications tools, such as those from Granicus, integrating SMS/text messaging tactics offer a high benefit to cost ratio that allows government to easily broaden their reach and improve their outcomes.

Reach Out Today >