SMS, Ten Years Later

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By Christopher Saunders, managing editor of InstantMessagingPlanet.com.

Officially 10 years old this week, Short Messaging Service, or SMS, has been one of the major bright spots emerging from the rash of new developments in communications technology during the '90s.

On Dec. 3, 1992, Neil Papworth of Sema plc (now a unit of Schlumberger Limited) used his PC to send what's generally believed to have been the first SMS message to the cell phone of Richard Jarvis, then a director at UK telecom giant Vodafone.

The message, "Merry Christmas," served as a test of one specification of the emerging GSM Phase 1 standard, an initiative designed to revamp worldwide analog cellular phone infrastructure with digital technology.

Known as TeleNotes, the productized version of SMS was thought of as a technology most applicable to businesses -- for instance, as a pager-like service. Because users could only communicate with others who used the same carrier, such an enterprise-focused product made sense, as companies were commonly buying mobile phone plans from single carriers in bulk for their employees.

"We'd use it in the office to remind people of a meeting," said Vodafone spokesman Toby Robson. "I think that's what people had in mind when the specification was written into GSM standard."

In addition to being several weeks early, that first holiday message was also premature in signaling the force that SMS was to become: uptake remained fairly stagnant until the late 90's. At that point, wireless carriers opened their systems to SMS interoperability, and began introducing prepaid calling plans that appealed to lower-income users, like students. Carriers also often were failing to bill prepaid phone users, at least initially, for SMS use -- encouraging the technology's use among the young and tech-savvy.

Shortly after noticing an increase in the service's use (and after clamping down on prepaid "freeloaders,") carriers recognized SMS as a potential revenue stream, and began launching efforts to market the technology to consumers in earnest.

"In 1998-99, we began targeting the youth market in particular -- the student population," he added. "We realized obviously that it's a cheap and convenient means of communicating -- and it's fun, and it's discrete, perfect for the lecture hall.

"The major barrier had been if I had wanted to send a text message to a friend, I wouldn't know which network they were on," Robson said. "Once that opened up, it was amazing -- we saw this very upward-creeping curve in terms of usage. I remember being present when we celebrated a million messages a month."

By the end of 2000, conservative estimates pegged the number of SMS messages being exchanged at 10 billion per month. That year also saw some of the first deployments of SMS-based advertising, although much of the wireless industry was focusing instead on pushing WAP as a new communications channel.

While WAP failed to grow in popularity as expected, it did help to further consumer awareness of mobile data applications. Another non-voice effort also being deployed at the same time proved more successful, however: Nokia had begun work with binary SMS, rather than text messaging. The upshot was that the handset maker could deliver ringtones to mobile phones -- which quickly became a multi-million-dollar industry.

Systems also developed for the reverse-charging of SMS messages, paving the way for a makeshift (and fairly successful) technique for making purchases via text messages.

Boundaries Remain

To an extent, SMS usage remains somewhat stymied on a global scale by the lingering impact of its early obstacles. Initially, the technology was only available on GSM, and not on other mobile networks -- such as in North America, where Code Division Multiple Access and Time Division Multiple Access were the dominant systems.

In 1994, the Federal Communications Commission opened a spectrum of radio frequencies for Personal Communication Services (PCS) at 1900MHz -- paving the way for new digital technologies. Additionally, Microcell, a GSM-based carrier in Canada, began offering two-way SMS in 1996. Nevertheless, one-way SMS didn't reach North America until early 1997, when BellSouth Mobility and Nextel began offering the services.

Two-way messaging wasn't available until late 2000 in the Americas. And only earlier this year, North American wireless carriers began signing agreements allowing for inter-carrier messaging -- work that's still underway, and has long represened a major roadblock to SMS penetration in the region.

According to figures from Jupiter Research (a sister company of this Web site's publisher), American SMS users represent less than 40 percent of all wireless subscribers; on the other hand, about 75 percent of wireless users also use SMS in the U.K. and Norway.

U.S. users also send fewer than five SMS messages a month on average, versus 34 in the U.K. and 56 in Norway.

Also, a study in August by the International Engineering Consortium found that 62 percent of top executives at wireless carriers believe that by the year 2004, North American SMS will not have met even the present levels of penetration in Europe and Asia.

Threats from MMS?

Despite the potential for greater expansion into markets like the U.S., some think that SMS already has seen much of the height of its popularity. For one thing, a maturing market is expected by many to cap industry growth in 2003 and 2004.

Additionally, recent months have seen the deployment of Multimedia Messaging Services (MMS) -- pegged by some as a potential replacement for SMS communications. According to Jupiter Research, MMS traffic will begin to grow sharply in late 2004, when multimedia-capable handsets comprise about 25 percent of the marketplace.

As a result, MMS and other new formats of messaging will cut into the growth of SMS in coming years, contributing to a decline in text messaging in 2006 and 2007.

Handset manufacturers such as Nokia and carriers like Vodafone are pushing hard for new wireless applications even now. Nokia recently concluded a massive consumer marketing campaign for its MMS-enabled phones, while Vodafone in October launched Vodafone Live!, a wireless, multimedia portal based on high-speed General Packet Radio Service.

Nevertheless, SMS's prospects still don't look too dim, even in spite of its technological shortcomings compared to MMS. For one thing, MMS and similar forms are expected to be significantly more pricey than SMS -- ensuring that texting remains popular for quick, on-the-go messages.

"MMS will flow on in the same tradition, but not necessarily at the expense of text messaging," Robson said. "Text messaging still has a lot of scope in the future."

Indeed, some are predicting relatively uncharted applications for SMS. One such use could be as the backbone of a robust application-to-person messaging trend. According to Jupiter's figures, such traffic could grow from about 5 billion messages in 2001 to 22 billion in 2007. At that time, half of all SMS users are expected to have signed up for application-to-person messages.

In a similar vein, Sprint recently introduced a new IM-based service for enabling users to interface with applications. The wireless component of that system is based on SMS.

There's also the cultural argument: that in Europe and elsewhere, SMS has become so integrated into daily life -- witness the emergence of that truncated text speak ("txt spk") and the previously unheard-of verb, "texting," -- that it's unlikely to fade away anytime soon (much to the chagrin, no doubt, of language purists.)

"Text messages have become a vital part of our culture," said Mike Short, chairman of the Mobile Data Association and a vice president at O2. "The ever increasing number of texts sent every month and diversity of use is concrete proof of that fact."

http://www.instantmessagingplanet.com/wireless/article.php/10766_1553321 (consultado a 06/06/2005).

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SMS, El triunfo de un mensaje corto

Nació en una pizzería en 1982 y estuvo olvidado una década. En 2004 se enviaron medio billón de mensajes de texto. Esta semana ha servido para comunicar el nacimiento de la heredera

El departamento de prensa de Zarzuela avisó por SMS del ingreso, parto y nacimiento. Eran las 2:35 horas del lunes cuando los móviles de los periodistas recibieron el mensaje. "La Princesa de Asturias acaba de dar a luz una niña". Con esos 65 caracteres los periódicos, radios y televisiones completaron páginas y horas de emisión. Los mensajes cortos, a pesar de su pequeñez, se han convertido en una de las formas más poderosas de comunicación. Y eso que cuando nació esta tecnología muy pocos, y aun menos las compañías telefónicas, le auguraban mucho futuro al SMS.

Fue en una pizzería de Copenhague, Dinamarca, cuando el ingeniero finés Matti Makkonen, presentó la idea en unas conferencias sobre el futuro de la comunicación por telefonía móvil en el otoño de 1982. Tan poco futuro se le vio a su idea que no fue hasta 1990 cuando se aprobaron las vigentes especificaciones técnicas del Short Message Service, SMS o Servicio de Mensajes cortos. Otra prueba más del escepticismo de la industria: el primer SMS comercial fue enviado una década después de que Makkonen lo ideara. El 3 de diciembre de 1992, el británico Neil Papworth mandó desde su ordenador un SMS a su colega Richard Jarvis, que trabajaba para Vodafone. ¿Imaginan que decía el mensaje? "Merry Christmas".

Entre las tres de la tarde del 31 de diciembre de 2004 y la misma hora del 1 de enero, se mandaron 100 millones de SMS en España. Se estima que en 2004 se enviaron medio billón de SMS en el mundo. Matti Makkonen, el inventor del SMS, es hoy el presidente de una compañía de telecomunicaciones y Vodafone, la primera en ver las posibilidades de los mensajes, es líder mundial en telefonía móvil.

Pero los SMS no sólo han crecido exponencialmente en su uso, tambien lo ha hecho en usos. Cada día sale una nueva utilidad. Se puede confirmar la declaración de Hacienda. En Suiza, un cantón acaba de votar por SMS en un referéndum. Y la mayor parte del dinero recaudado para las víctimas del tsunami del sudeste asiático provino, céntimo a céntimo, de mensajitos. Para pacientes es la ocurrencia de una empresa granadina: una edición de El Quijote en SMS.

Este éxito ha tenido mucho que ver en la evolución de los teléfonos móviles. De máquinas para hablar, se han convertido en equipos para la comunicación no verbal. El sistema MMS, por ejemplo, es una evolución del SMS. Pensado para vencer la barrera de los 160 caracteres, para mandar textos más largos, era poco usado hasta que despegó con la llegada de las cámaras al móvil. Enviar fotos o vídeos es cuestion de dar a una tecla.

El último elemento en explotar ha sido el email, con i-Mode y las Blackberry. Pero estas tecnologías, como la navegación por móvil, ya no usan el sistema ideado por Matti Makkonen en una pizzería