

Cracking The Local (Short) Code

One of the pesky shortfalls of using TV on-air prompts for short codes is the brevity of the exposure. A number of us commenting on this year's under-mobilized Super Bowl TV ads noticed the problem. When advertisers tried to squeeze a short code mention into a spot, it was too fleeting to be noticed, let alone recalled.

The power of broadcast, both radio and TV, to push people into SMS exchanges is legendary. "American Idol" is the model for executing on-air prompts effectively, and the lesson is simple: integrate the process in the program. Simply tagging an SMS prompt at the tail end of an ad or as a fleeting mention during a program is just not enough. You can't expect people to grasp for their phones mentally trying to repeat the short code in their head so it doesn't spill out their ears. Radio has the advantage of frequency, of course. Repeated mentions throughout the programming day can hard-code a number in listeners' heads. A radio team can leverage the same short code with loyal listeners by attaching a specific keyword to a client's program.

But how can SMS marketers get into TV programming in a more impactful way? One local NBC affiliate in Detroit, WDIV-TV, ran an interesting and instructive program for the local Twelve Oaks Mall during its Thanksgiving Day broadcast. According to Mark Nicholson, who manages premier accounts and special projects for the station, WDIV had been using short codes quite a bit with clients in the past year, but this execution really showed how programming joined with mobile to blow the doors off previous projects. The annual Thanksgiving Parade is one of the biggest programming events in the Q4 calendar for the station, a four-hour extravaganza. "We needed a way not only to develop a new revenue stream," says Nicholson, "we needed to find a way to make the program itself more interactive for viewers."

WDIV uses the HipCricket SMS system to fly and manage campaigns with clients. In order to keep viewers engaged, Nicholson created a text-to-win contest for four \$250 gift cards to the Twelve Oaks Mall, with one awarded every hour. The program helped the station land a new client by bringing them a novel marketing idea. More than a dozen mentions throughout the broadcast reinforced the program, as did the hourly announcements on-air of the winners. The program netted a remarkable 91,000 text messages.

The persistent reinforcement of the code itself, and the opportunity to have some interactive hook during the lengthy program, seemed to fuel the strong response. For Twelve Oaks, it generated an opportunity to remarket to thousands of potential customers who opted in to receive more messages. WDIV clients have access to the database, which WDIV retains, as long as they are customers.

For a local window company, WDIV developed an SMS component that reached across the on-air ads and the robust WDIV Web site. It provided the client with demonstrable qualified leads.

On the local level, Nicholson contends that SMS is becoming an important arrow in his quiver with clients. "What drives our text campaigns to be effective is that you are using the premier broadcast property. When you have reach that is significant you will have success with it." Also key is turnkey simplicity. He credits HipCricket with giving him a frictionless set of tools that offers back-end reporting to show ROI to the client. You don't want the client head to hurt or have his eyes glaze over when you introduce a mobile component in the plan. But SMS adds to a broadcaster's portfolio a product that can give an advertiser a longstanding relationship with customers.

Getting local advertisers involved in the Web and search have been tough enough. On the face of it, convincing the mom and pops and SMBs that something as seemingly esoteric as SMS works for them could be even tougher. But because SMS works on a person-to-person level, I wonder if it may be easier for local businesses to see the benefit of programs like this if sellers can insulate them from the technology and complexity. For local advertisers, the Web and search often seemed somehow more global and less local, even as users were using the Web to access nearby services. The technology has always been daunting for many. As service providers like Nicholson streamline the process for marketers, it will be interesting to see how the local market responds.