

Text Messaging

Purpose

This document has been designed to assist Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) employees and contractors who wish to use text messaging to disseminate health messages.

Background

Text messages are 160-character messages that can be sent and received on a mobile phone. According to CTIA, the Wireless Association, 91% of American adults owns a mobile phone. With the use of text messaging available on 98% of all phones, the number of text messaging users continues to grow. (<http://www.cellsigns.com/industry.shtml>). Text messaging is a simple and easy way to reach a large portion of the general population with important health messages.

Communications Strategy

Text messaging programs and other social media tools are intended to be part of a larger integrated health communications program or project developed under the leadership of the Associate Director of Communication Science (ADCS) in the Health Communication Science Office (HCSO) of CDC's National Centers. HCSOs are responsible for the coordination and guidance of health marketing and communication activities of their respective centers which includes communications science clearance, strategic planning, and research and evaluation.

Clearance and Approval

Messages: All text messages must be cleared through the clearance channels determined by your HCSO office.

Security Requirements: The Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCISO) should be consulted on the specifics of new text messaging projects to determine the clearance and accreditation requirements. To facilitate this process, contact your Center's Information System Security Officer (ISSO). Additional information can be found at <http://intranet.cdc.gov/ociso/ISSOs.html>. (This page is only accessible on the CDC network.)

Consultation

The Electronic Media Branch (EMB) provides consultation on the planning and development of text message programs, expertise in writing effective and compelling text messages and promotion and evaluation experience that can be helpful to programs using text messages in health communication activities. EMB staff can assist in program participation in an existing CDC text messaging project or a new text messaging project.

Existing Text Messaging Project:

EMB developed a text messaging pilot in September 2009 which has a large and engaged following. Using this project to disseminate text messages will generally be the most effective use of program resources because the start-up costs have already been

covered. EMB can help disseminate occasional text messages as well as coordinate frequent, topic based projects through this mechanism.

New Text Messaging Project:

In some cases, if special technology or features are needed in a text messaging service, a program may need to develop their own text messaging plan. EMB can consult on these activities by providing assistance in determining which vendor(s) and service(s) are appropriate and best meet the program needs.

Please contact socialmedia@cdc.gov for more information using text messages in your health communications and marketing activities.

New Text Messaging Projects Best Practices

1. Planning Activities for New Text Messaging Projects

To be most effective, it is recommended that a text messaging project be a component of a larger integrated health communications campaign in support of the overall campaign goals. Before starting development, please consider the following:

- Target Audience(s)

As with any communications activity, it is important to define your intended target audience(s) in order to develop and communicate messages that resonate with your audience and prompt them to take action. Text messages can be an effective way to reach a variety of audiences like racial and ethnic minorities, teens, moms, and

- Objectives

It is also important to have clearly defined objectives before starting a text messaging project. What action would you like the recipient to take once they receive the message? What is your overall objective?

- Budget

Text messaging systems are usually delivered through contracts with outside vendors. There are various factors that can impact the cost of implementing a mobile text messaging project including length of program, number of subscribers and the number of messages sent. Contact EMB at socialmedia@cdc.gov for more information.

- Referrals

If the text message encourages the recipient to call CDC-INFO for additional information, please notify CDC-INFO in advance so they are prepared.

2. Length of Message

Text messages should be short and concise. The entire message should be less than 160 characters, including spaces, punctuation, branding, links, and opt-out instructions. To test the length of a text message, go to <http://nchm-dvss1.cdc.gov/count.html> and paste or type your message in the box provided.

3. Content of Message

The message content should be topical and cleared by normal clearance channels. All content should be written at no more than a 8th grade reading level.

a. Abbreviations:

Because text messages have a character limit, abbreviations are often used. Abbreviations should only be used when they are easily understood and do not change the meaning of the message. Some common abbreviations are:

- US for United States
- Info for Information
- & for And
- Msg for Message
- IMPT for Important

b. Punctuation:

Use necessary punctuation only if required for clarity or emphasis.

c. Message Components:

- **Body:**
CDC.gov users report wanting relevant, actionable, timely, clear and interesting text messages. If possible, it is helpful to target messages to make them more relevant and provide a clear call to action in the body of the message.
- **Branding:**
The message should clearly be labeled so that users can easily determine the sender of the message.
- **Links and Tags:**
Include a way for users to follow up or respond to the message, such as a phone number and/or URL to a mobile Web site. Links to traditional Web sites should be avoided and links to sites that have been designed specifically for mobile devices should be used.
- **Phone Numbers:**
All phone numbers should be formatted so the user can click-to-call the number automatically from their cell phone. For example, do NOT use the number 1-800-CDC-INFO, instead use 800-232-4636.
- **Opt-Out Instructions:** If users can opt-in for the messages, then opt-out instructions should be provided at the end of some of these messages. The opt-out message is typically something similar to “Reply HEALTH QUIT to end.” This message includes 25 characters. While the opt-out message does not need to be attached to every message, it should be included approximately once a week.

Sample Text Messages

- Test your smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detector when u turn your clocks back on Nov 1; replace batteries if needed. Call CDC 800-232-4636 or <http://m.cdc.gov>.
- Cover cough & sneezes to protect others. Call CDC 800-232-4636 or <http://m.cdc.gov> for more info. Reply HEALTH QUIT to end.
- Spread the word! Tell friends & family to text 4HEALTH to 87000 to get these weekly H1N1 messages & impt health tips. Call CDC 800-232-4636 or <http://m.cdc.gov>
- Thanksgiving is Nat'l Family History Day. Talk to UR family about health conditions that run in UR family. Learn more <http://m.cdc.gov/family>. CDC 800-232-4636