

# Ringing the changes

Although SMS donations are said to be the next big thing in the fundraising toolbox, this isn't the only way mobile phone technology can be used for the benefit of the sector, as Becky Slack finds out

Imagine – a person is walking down the street when they receive a message to their mobile phone. Opening it, they download a short film about the work a charity is doing, which includes a call to action. Following this up, they then access the organisation's mobile-ready WAP site, where they sign an online petition and pay for a new polyphonic ring tone for their phone. Finally, they forward the message on to five of their friends – who may not already know about the charity and its

cause – and so the actions are repeated.

This scenario is not unrealistic. According to the Empocket *Mobile Media Monitor UK*, over 80 per cent of the population own a mobile phone – a figure that is constantly rising, principally within the 65 year old and over generation. In 2003, 43 per cent of this age group owned a mobile phone. By 2004 this figure had grown to 58 per cent.

Parallel to this increase is a growth in the number of people owning more advanced models of mobile phones, PDAs and Blackberries that come with a variety of colour screens, WAP, digital cameras, MP3 players, MPEG4 video players and 3G technology. Over 50 per cent of the population can access the Internet using their phones (including 81 per cent of 18-24 year olds); and around half of mobile phone users now own MMS (multimedia messaging service) capable handsets. And these phones are not just used to contact friends and colleagues: a third of 18-44 year olds used their phones in 2004 to respond to or participate in television and radio shows, advertisements and promotions.

And it doesn't stop here. Technology is now emerging that will allow live television to be streamed to hand-held devices. Trials have already taken place and although there are still questions to be answered regarding functionality, battery life, screen size etc, it is guaranteed that within the next two to three years, these new devices will be deployed on the market. One trial that has recently taken place by BT Livetime and Virgin Mobile includes "Red Button" interactive functionality – something that if successful, has obvious advantages for the charity sector. Over the past three years, for example, Children in Need has received £1 million from people using their red buttons on their television remote controls to donate. There is no reason to suggest that this success could not also be eventually replicated via mobile phones.

The potential mobile phone technology can offer the charity sector therefore is huge. Taking the opening scenario, for example, by sending one MMS message the charity is able to interact not just with its own supporter, but potentially five new supporters, and on three different levels: by providing information about its work; allowing them to campaign on the charity's behalf; and raising money for the cause.

But perhaps all this is a little premature for a sector that is only just getting to grips with SMS donations. Although this mechanism has been used since 2002 when it raised £350,000 for Sport Relief, it is only since the tsunami appeal, which generated more than 650,000 text messages and £1 million, that the bar has really been raised.

This is confirmed by William Hoyle, chief executive of Charity Technology Trust, which has recently taken over smstextgiving.com, the mobile phone donation operator: "The real interest in SMS donations has only really taken off within the last six to twelve months," he says. "It was triggered by recent

high profile campaigns, such as the tsunami appeal and also the Live8 ticket lottery."

Hoyle points out that if every one of the 46 million mobile phones users in the UK donated £1.50 via SMS, the sector would see its income rise by £810 million, or £1,036 million if all the donations were gift aided.

Some charities aren't just using mobile phones as a donation mechanism but also as a means of taking part in prize draws and competitions, and as a supporter communication tool. The Royal Academy of Music, for example, sends text messages using its Advantage Fundraiser database to tell those attending its concerts of any changes to the programme or cancellations. By sending bulk messages to the appropriate guests, they can contact them quickly, easily and relatively cheaply.



Kiwanja.net is looking for charities to test its new Frontline SMS system. For more information on how to get on board visit [www.frontlinesms.com](http://www.frontlinesms.com)

But despite these benefits, SMS giving does have its disadvantages. Currently, no more than £1.50 can be donated at one time – and this is subject to fees. Although on rare occasions mobile phone operators have agreed to waive fees, on the most part they do not, and for a supporter to donate £1, it costs them an extra 60-62p in mobile phone charges and VAT.

The Institute of Fundraising is currently in conversation with the operators to see if an agreement can be made to introduce a discounted charging structure for charities.

The success of the mechanism is also dependent on several other factors. If it's being used as a fundraising tool, then promotion is important – as with any product or service, if people don't know about it, they won't use it. Plus if a charity wants to send information to supporters, they need to have the appropriate mobile phone numbers, and it is also more costly than sending an email.

A limited number of organisations have taken SMS donations a step further and have introduced a multi-media aspect to their communications. The MakePovertyHistory campaign is one. In partnership with Vodafone, it set up a G8 gallery showing over 10,000 photos and video clips of campaigners' activities that had been sent in via mobile phones. Comic Relief has also experimented with the various ways in which it can use MMS.

"For the last Red Nose Day, we wanted to offer video footage of Fame Academy but not everything fell into place and it didn't quite work out," explains Martin Gill, head of new media at Comic Relief. Despite the preliminary trial failing, MMS hasn't been removed from the drawing board and he is currently considering ways in which it can be used during next year's Sport Relief campaign. "Public awareness is really key to using mobile phones," reckons Gill. "We think that after Christmas when people will have received upgraded phones and other hand-held devices as presents, it will be easier to engage with

them using this technology. The more confident people are when emailing pictures and video files, the more likely they are to participate in a MMS campaign."

This is all very well but to take advantage of this means investing in new technology and expensive staff with specialist skills – doesn't it?

Not necessarily. Most of the major database providers have updated their systems to enable charities to send SMS and MMS messages to their contacts, however uptake so far has been slow. As Steve Cast from Redbourne, puts it: "The technology is there, the charities simply have to decide to use it. We haven't really pushed it through as we're not comfortable with the idea of technology driving the charity. It should be the other way round."

Another firm, Kiwanja.net has created a system called Global Gorillaz to be launched in the autumn, which will offer the "nuts and bolts" of downloading, allowing charities to easily sell a range of content, whether in the form of photographs of their work, sounds, videos and so on.

"Charities just have to supply the content," explains kiwanja.net director, Ken Banks. "Global Gorillaz will then deal with the technical delivery mechanisms, the billing, the technical support, network negotiating, hosting, the reporting and the finances, regardless of originating currency. After our costs are deducted, participating charities get their share of the income."

Kiwanja.net is also developing Frontline SMS. Whereas many SMS messaging systems require the user to be online in order for messages to be sent, this system runs off a mobile phone, and has been designed specifically with charities and NGOs in mind, particularly those working in the third world where Internet access might not be so readily available. The idea is that they can use it for a variety of purposes from reminding patients to take their medicine to sending young people text alerts of job opportunities.

Systems such as this are a prime example of how mobile phones are not just a fundraising tool, but can be used to communicate with the full range of stakeholders, including beneficiaries. And they show that charities don't need to invest heavily in technology and specialist staff in order to do so. With the expansion of mobile phone networks showing no signs of slowing, charities should be looking every which way at how they can take advantage.

