

THE SUCCESS BEHIND TEXT MESSAGING – AN EDUCATOR’S PERSPECTIVE

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Many schools are achieving reductions in unexplained absences of up to 80% and improvements in student attendance of up to 50% using SMS text messaging. With more than 100 High Schools Australia-wide using the MGM Wireless Messaging product, messageyou™ Schools (MsgU), and many more about to take up this new technology, it is worth exploring the reasons behind the success of text messaging as a school communication tool.

Understanding the Complexity of SMS Messaging in Schools

Implementing SMS messaging is a highly visible project, directly targeting parents on a highly emotive subject – their child’s attendance. This project carries significant risk, and directly affects the school’s standing and reputation in its community.

Many Principals now realise that to achieve success with such a complex project, the key issues and costs of business process re-engineering, staff training and development, infrastructure, support, people change and school management practices must all be considered, alongside IT application costs.

Messaging – Why Focus on Student Attendance?

The level of Student Attendance is a key performance measure in every school. Best School

Management Practice demands this. Students who miss significant amounts of time at school, or on education related activities, potentially reduce their learning and career opportunities.

“Unemployment, poverty, homelessness and minor or gross criminal activity can often be linked to this basic failure” *to attend school regularly* (Withers 2004). Non attendance is an issue that requires communication between all partners - students, parents and teachers. All stakeholders need to be engaged to tackle such a high priority concern.

The Impact of Messaging on Building Parent Relationships

School to parent SMS text messaging is rapid communication with high impact. It also affects the way people in schools ‘do business’. Messaging is a new component in a suite of communication strategies, which in their entirety help determine the relationship culture of the school. Those schools that get their communication right are more likely to have strong parent, student and teacher relationships. Text messaging allows rapid, interactive two-way communication, which fits into the busy lives of parents and teachers. As an ‘alert’, it goes directly to the people who need to know and provides a timely, low cost, time efficient message with an easy response capability. The SMS does not eliminate the need for follow-up phone calls, letters or meetings where these are required but schools using MsgU do experience significant reductions in these resource intensive activities. MGM works with each school community to ensure that people’s expectations are realistic and that text messaging fits appropriately into the school ethos. The implementation approach embraces a culture of participation and mutual responsibility from the start of the process.

Software Characteristics

MsgU, unlike messaging services offered by many Internet Providers, interacts directly with a school's student management system. A simple interface enables messages to be either automatically or manually generated at times nominated by the school. MsgU constructs personalised text messages by seamlessly drawing data directly from the student management system, thereby avoiding the creation of multiple databases which can result in loss of data integrity, inaccuracy and compromises of security. The short setup time and ease with which schools can change attendance data filters and message formats significantly reduce the work currently carried out by the school staff who are responsible for managing student absence issues. In addition to obvious attendance related issues such as unexplained absences, late arrivals and fractional truancy, the application can be customised for an almost unlimited spectrum of automated messaging purposes, including forthcoming detentions, sports notifications or general communication alerts.

Infrastructure

In most schools, student management systems sit within an administration network, behind a secure firewall. MsgU is an application that meets the "ideal software characteristics" of having a small footprint, being easily loaded on to a PC connected to the network, with no additional hardware costs. IT security is maintained by using specific ports approved by the school or government jurisdiction. All staff members authorised to access MsgU can do so from any PC on the network.

Support Requirements

Too often, software applications are introduced into schools without putting in place internal as well as external support structures. Whilst the training required to use MsgU is not complex, to be successful it needs to be accompanied by a thorough review and enhancement of workflow processes. MGM Wireless understands and helps school leaders manage internal support strategies through comprehensive training and documentation for staff, students and parents. In addition it provides external technical application support and a message traffic monitoring service. A key difference between MGM and some other IT software companies is this focus on ensuring the school continually gets the best out of the product within the management context of each individual school.

Real Costs / Real Savings

How do you put a price on the benefits of increased student attendance and greater community confidence arising from a text messaging system? MGM Wireless encourages schools to set measurable goals throughout the review process, to maintain data checks relating to student absence, communication transactions, follow-up activities and changes in work practice. Using MsgU, schools can significantly reduce time spent on daily phone regimes or mail-outs.

A messaging system can be a great investment when it is provided by a specialist SMS solutions provider specialising in the education sector, one that has the characteristics of being a leader in the technology, understands and works within each school's context, has an application that integrates seamlessly with the school's student management system and SMS carriers and provides holistic, customised support services. Anything less is a short cut to potential failure.

For more information, MGM Wireless can be contacted on (08)8431 2300 or email info@mgmwireless.com.

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References

1. Withers, G (2004). Disenchantment, Disengagement, Disappearance. ACER. Learning Choice Expo conducted by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum in June 2004