

## Voice SMS

by Jeff Epstein

Mobile phone communication has rapidly evolved from direct, real-time voice interaction to a suite of non-voice and indirect means of wireless communication, including Short Message Service (SMS), Multimedia Message Service (MMS) and Instant Messaging (IM). However, many people are not comfortable with these methods and prefer to use their handsets only for direct, spoken communication. A new feature, Voice SMS, fills the gap between voice and indirect/non-voice communication by combining today's newest indirect interaction with the advantages of speech.

Voice SMS is, simply put, the ability to leave a voice message for someone without ringing their handset. It's similar to SMS and MMS in that it involves one-way communication. It's similar to voicemail in that a voice message is sent for someone to hear when they want to access it, but it's different in that it's an intentional voice message. Rather than being a byproduct of not being able to communicate directly, Voice SMS adds a new dimension to mobile phone communications.

Why and when would you want to leave a voice message for someone without ringing their phone? When would you want to use this service?

- You need to leave someone a message, but it's the middle of the night.
- You don't have time to have a conversation, but need to tell someone something immediately.
- The person you need to reach is in a meeting, at the movies or is otherwise unavailable.
- You want to broadcast brief messages to a wide audience, such as within a business.

Why would you prefer to send a voice message rather than a text message? After all, SMS is hugely popular in most of the world.

- Many people don't like to type on handsets or physically can not do so. Voice is quicker and simpler.

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- Voice is easier to do while multi-tasking, such as driving.
- Voice conveys more information than text, expressing emotion, inflection, and attitude. Hearing someone say or sing “Happy Birthday” is much more meaningful than seeing the words.
- Many parts of the world speak in languages that aren’t supported by SMS, making a text message impossible to send.
- A 30 or 60 second voice message can convey more information than a 160 characters of text.
- Deciphering a child’s cryptic message (c u l8r) is tiresome.

Here’s how Voice SMS works. A caller dials a prefix and the number of the party they want to leave a message for. They speak their message and hang up. An SMS (or MMS) is then sent to the called party, telling them that they have a voice message waiting for them. The called party can then press a key and be connected to their message. The called party can also choose to respond in the same way or ring the calling party back directly.

And just like SMS text messaging, you can record one message and have it sent to multiple recipients with Voice SMS.

“A large chunk of the mobile phone-using population is not using SMS due to issues like handset incompatibility, lack of knowledge in English or inability to type on the phone keys. Voice SMS gets you to communicate in your own way,” said Mr Deepak Mehrotra, CEO (Mobile Services) — Bharti Airtel Ltd, Karnataka.

For service providers, Voice SMS is simple to install and operate. It works across all carrier networks and on all handsets. Even non-subscribers can receive and reply to Voice SMS messages, and Voice SMS works for both pre- and post- paid subscribers.

Service providers can choose multiple ways of generating Voice SMS revenue, from increased air time via deposited messages and retrievals to charging on a per message basis. Several Asian countries have shown 30% to 50% penetration in less than 12 months for a Voice SMS feature priced below voice phone calls, yet 50% higher than text messages.

Additionally, service providers can configure their network to send missed calls to a Voice SMS Center, playing an announcement to the caller such as “The person you called is not available now. To leave a Voice SMS, press one now.” For the 50%-90% of subscribers in many countries who choose not to use voicemail, this provides a powerful complementary service to other call completion strategies such as sending SMS notification messages for missed calls. Service providers can also generate additional supplementary revenue by adding advertising messages to the SMS or MMS notification message sent to the called party, or in an optional confirmation message sent to the calling party upon delivery of their message.

Many regions of the world will likely be interested in Voice SMS: countries with low voice mail usage due to financial or cultural reasons, regions with low literacy rates, and countries with high usage of SMS text messaging, will be amongst the areas expected to rapidly adopt Voice SMS.

Since some service providers charge for leaving a voicemail and for the airtime needed to retrieve it, the financial advantages of Voice SMS are attractive. In addition, many subscribers dislike being charged for leaving a voicemail, especially when they suspect the called party will probably never call to hear it. Likewise, subscribers don't like being charged for the 'privilege' of hearing their voicemail.

Additionally, people in many cultures consider it impolite to leave a voice message even when given the option to do so. For countries where this is the case, such as is often seen in the Middle East, Far East, and Africa, and where SMS text messaging is highly popular, Voice SMS needs to be marketed as "SMS with voice" in order to overcome the cultural bias against voicemail.

Studies have shown a strong correlation between the literacy rate of a country and SMS text messaging usage. Not surprisingly, areas with low levels of literacy use SMS to a far lesser degree than areas with high levels of literacy. Where adult literacy rates are lower than 70%, there is a marked decrease in SMS traffic per subscriber. It's estimated that many millions of subscribers could use Voice SMS who can not use SMS effectively.

Countries with high usage of SMS will also be interested in Voice SMS. High rates of text messaging often correlate with teens and young adults using SMS as an easy alternative to direct interaction for everything from making plans with friends to letting parents know they'll be home late. These youth, ever eager for new ways to assert themselves, will spread Voice SMS usage virally among their peers.

- When asked about Voice SMS, youths using it in India said:
- "One thing that I like in this is that whatever we cannot say directly to a person we can say it in a short voice message."
- "Instead of typing we can speak. This is really good."
- "Even a kid can use it"

A few of the service providers around the globe now offering Voice SMS include Indonesia's IndoSat, Spain's Vodafone, Sprint in the United States, Digi in Malaysia, and Grameen in Bangladesh.

In the first week of launch, Digi handled 80,000 Voice SMS messages per day, while Grameen has 38% of their seven million subscribers using Voice SMS - one subscriber sent 2000 Voice SMS messages in a single month!

SMS now has a voice. It's called Voice SMS.

For more information on Voice SMS, see [http://www.intervoice.com/index.php/industries\\_innovations.html](http://www.intervoice.com/index.php/industries_innovations.html).