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Email and SMS not ready for extinction

Piet Streicher, MD of BulkSMS.com says that "traditional" digital communication mediums will not be replaced by social media.

The advent of new communication tools like Facebook and Twitter, combined with the digital era information overload has led to some commentators predicting the death of sender-controlled communications, changing how businesses communicate with their customers.

According to them, applications like email and SMS will soon become extinct as consumers opt for more control over the information they receive. But like most predictions relating to new trends, these comments are perhaps too radical. Communication in the future will probably tend towards a middle path. In fact, a scenario where the receiver has sole control over communication could potentially be more onerous for consumers.

Speculators have described a future where consumers manage all their communication via a single interface. But just think of all the companies and individuals you personally deal with on a daily basis, and all the different types of communication you receive. While controlling who may communicate with you might be possible, determining electronically the context of communications from the receiver side is very difficult. The context of the communication often determines whether we expect, or even demand, the business to notify us, or whether we regard the communication as a nuisance.

Product recall notices, disaster notifications, or notices of delays are examples of communication people demand to receive. Timely reminders are also regarded by most consumers as beneficial, for example a last minute SMS reminder from the dentist reminding you of your next appointment.

Another example is taking your car to a panel beater. They ask for your cellphone number so they can keep you updated on progress via SMS. This is beneficial as you do not have to make the effort to follow up personally. Would I give them my Facebook or Twitter profiles so that they can keep me updated? Probably not, as this would also then give them access to my personal profile, pictures and posts—not necessarily a good idea for a purely commercial relationship that is possibly once off.

It is conceivable that a specific social networking tool will emerge to fulfill this function. However, what is more likely is that companies will get smarter about their communications, ensuring that they are contacting customers in the manner of their choice. This will be achieved by offering customers a choice to opt-in and opt-out of a variety of communications, with the defaults selected by the company.

Facebook itself is a model example of this by providing users with a page that allows them to customise various types of email and SMS notifications. The beauty of digital forms of communication is that they can be tailored according to customers' preferences.

This communications paradigm stands in contrast to the days of mass-media communication, which are increasingly numbered—as is apparent by the declining advertising revenues in traditional media. Yet many businesses have not woken up to this fact or have not harnessed the potential of digital tools such as SMS, let alone social media for their business communications.

The future lies in businesses continuing to use sender-controlled media in a manner similar to social media services, where each business provides consumers with suitable control over the types of business

communication they receive. Ultimately, only the sender knows the context of messages and will be able to effectively use various communication mediums to meet consumer needs and demands.

If companies get it right, the holy grail of service – customer satisfaction – is theirs for the taking.