# Text messaging partners mobile and TV

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With more than 64.5 million text messages throughout Fox's fifth season of "American Idol," LogicaCMG gave United Press International a behind-the-scenes look at how text messaging is uniting the mobile and television industries.

As the developer of the text-messaging technology used by some 300 network operators and service providers including Cingular, Verizon, Sprint and T-Mobile, the multiple IT services company LogicaCMG delivers two out of every three text messages sent in the world and has provided the first commercial multi-media and video-message deployments.

"Text messaging has become valuable to television producers, providing a direct channel to customers in gaining back valuable feedback on their shows," said Han Weegink, LogicaCMG's director of marketing and communications.

At the same time, it has also meant the evolution of a business model for network operators to retain loyalty with customers as well as attract new ones through exclusive content, he said.

In fact, show-based text messaging is nothing new, having been around for about four to five years already and originally used to garner reactions from fans of a show.

The challenge, however, was tackling the problem that as shows got bigger and phone-in votes went up as a result, it was impossible for

network service providers to handle; therefore, text voting provided a good alternative.

And it is now that text voting has come into its own, he said, especially in the United States thanks to "American Idol."

In fact, having had the experience of handling massive volume over the last couple of years, LogicaCMG has figured out the success of text voting that satisfies all parties involved including the end user by watching from the mistakes of some shows bite the dust.

"The more successful a show gets, the more votes you get, and the more problems you get," said Weegink, pointing to "American Idol," which now receives millions of calls and text messages compared to some 1,000 texts per second in 2001 -- considered an enormous global market then.

According to Weegink, lessons learned since 2001 have meant that a) the end user with a confirmation message and reasonable price per text and b) how effectively and efficiently text voting is done on a technical level.

"Whereas, a voice call provides an immediate response to a vote -- you know right away -- and a busy signal if not, while text messaging is not 100 percent sure, unless you get some kind of feedback ... 'Thank you for your vote. We have counted your vote. Join us next week for our show,'" he said, "And some operators have forgotten to send confirmations, so customers had no clue if (their vote) was taken into account."

Of course, if customers have no clue if their vote was been accounted for, this could mean a problem for loyal customers but once taken care, the problem was then sending out a million confirmation messages for a million votes, he explained.

Moreover, reasonable prices per text became an issue.

For instance, he cited that on a Holland show, operators received $.50 per vote as well as $.50 per confirmation level, leaving some frustrated customers shocked and requesting a refund but only to spend $30 to $40 to roll back the transaction for the refund.

In addition, Weegink, as some operators were facing the problem of increased text votes, subsequently, they began to only aggregate votes which ran into legal problems but was also a lost for operators, by losing precious information.

But even more challenging these days is consolidating information for business in real time, Weegink said, citing how one show that wanted to set a world record by have 1 million people text in within 100 minutes wanted a real-time count during the show.

And it hasn't been until recently that text voting has transformed text messaging into new arenas and developed into good business for network operators, especially Cingular, with the success of "American Idol," attracting new customers via its exclusive rights with Fox and "American Idol."

For "Idol" fans, Cingular Wireless subscribers can text the word VOTE to the text messaging four digital short numbers for their favorite contestant for .$10 a message or as a package for as low as $2.99 a month.

Since Season 2, it saw the "Idol" campaign generate some 7.5 million text messages in its texting debut, followed by 13.5 million "Idol"-related text messages sent by customers throughout the season including fan mail, sweepstakes entries, games, trivia and votes in Season 3 -- representing an 80-percent increase from 2003, according to Cingular.

And in Season 4, with the merger with AT&T Wireless, the company had seen "Idol"-related text messages triple with 41.5 million sent throughout the season, it said.

"Our expectations for a record-breaking year with 'American Idol' is not based solely on high hopes; it is grounded in actual results that we've realized so far," John Burbank, Cingular's vice president of marketing, had said in March of this year. "Since we first launched much of our 'Idol'-themed content six weeks ago, Cingular has realized a significant increase in messaging results. In fact, our messaging results to date are greater than they were this time last year. And what makes this even more impressive is that voting just started."

Moreover, according to Weegink, the acquisition of a new customer is priced at $150 but in Cingular's situation, it saves $150 just with "American Idol" alone in some cases.

And by satisfying end users and retaining market valuable information from large volumes of text voting, LogicaCMG feels that the possibilities are endless for network operators, television producers and mobile content.

But what will text messaging tune into next as business continue to play more with the concept?

Well, companies are looking to expand even more looking into how TV formats can be integrated with the mobile, Weegink said.

This means more downloading of ringtones, show date/time alerts, sending pictures or video clips, and setting up chats with favorite celebrities' from a specific show which is proving to be a new business, transitioning the mobile from just simple text voting, he said.

"There is a lot more money to be made over this than text voting," Weegink said, "it's just that more attention is given to voting. If you preserve all the information from text voting, you can put it in target promotion."

Furthermore, end users who consistently vote stay even more loyal by receiving content freebies, he said.

However, he also notes that if a good business model is done right, and end users are rewarded for votes, then over time, he does see that operators could allow for free votes as mobile users become more prone to purchasing specific show mobile content.

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