GRANICUS
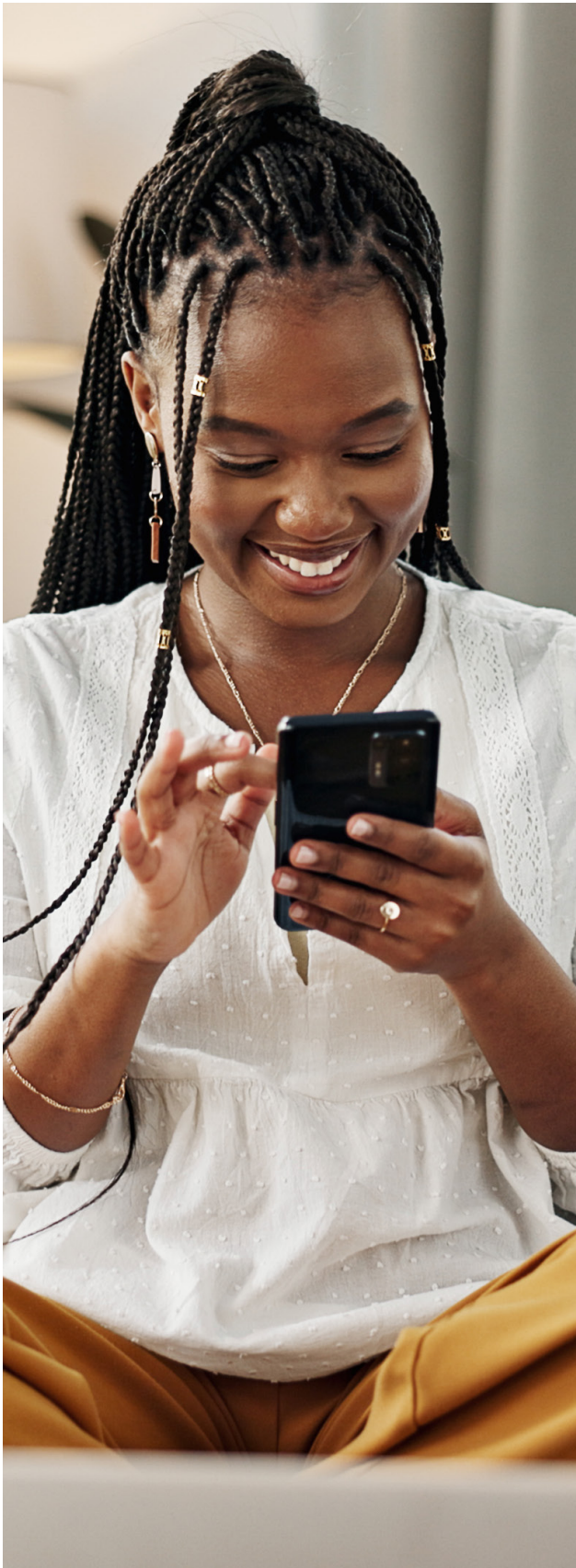
Best practices for SMS in federal government outreach strategies

Concise, real-time, action-oriented, and personal communications.

Introduction

Digital government has provided federal agencies with the tools and philosophical shifts to better connect with constituents and help serve their needs. One significant aspect of the digital revolution is the ability to deliver messaging through multiple channels, moving beyond websites and generic newsletters to include options like social media and SMS/text messaging.

While traditional SMS allows organizations to send one-way messages to constituents, now, two-way SMS options allow for interactive communication, fostering engagement and building stronger relationships. So why should your agency use SMS?

1. **Enhanced Engagement:** Two-way SMS encourages constituents to participate actively, leading to higher engagement rates.

2. **Increased Audience Reach:** Communicate with constituents where they are and ensure they can access the information and services they require.

3. **Real-Time Feedback:** It provides an immediate channel for feedback, allowing agencies to respond promptly to constituents' needs.

4. **Personalized Interaction:** It enables personalized communication, making constituents feel valued and understood.

These alternative methods provide a cost-effective way to increase outreach effectiveness while also encouraging greater engagement and program adoption as messages reach audiences where they are most likely to see them and act. The public has grown increasingly reliant on mobile devices over the last decade, making adoption urgent for the federal government.

Mobile-friendly government communications are necessary for vulnerable populations, as **27% of low-income individuals** rely solely on smartphones for digital access. While many government organizations have yet to realize the benefits of SMS messaging, some are embracing it, as evidenced by an **11% increase** between 2021 and 2022.

Use this guide as a blueprint for implementing SMS in your communications. With the tips and samples provided, you can supercharge the impact of your engagement strategy.

Change in Federal Agency Use of SMS

2021　2022

⌃ 11%

SMS MESSAGES (MILLIONS)
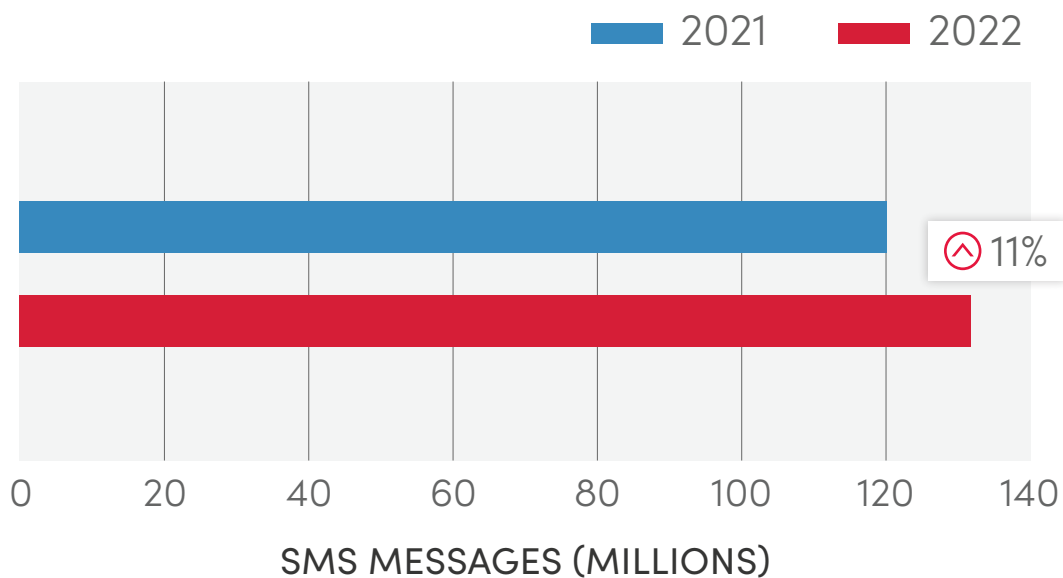
SMS is highly effective when leveraged responsibly

A common concern about SMS communication is that it might be perceived as spam. However, when used responsibly and strategically, SMS can be a highly effective and welcomed channel. To avoid the spam label, government must follow established best practices such as:

Opt-In and Consent: Ensure that constituents have explicitly opted in to receive SMS communications. This consent-based approach respects their preferences and builds trust.

Tip: Use an overlay on your website to capture users' attention and prompt them to subscribe.

Relevant Content: Send messages that are relevant and valuable to the recipient. Personalized and targeted messages based on their interests and needs are more likely to be engaged with and acted upon.

Tip: During the sign-up process, ask users questions about their interests and how they prefer to be communicated with.

Frequency and Timing: Be mindful of the frequency and timing of messages. Avoid overwhelming recipients with too many messages and choose appropriate times to send them.

Tip: A/B test different frequencies and timing to see what works for the different audiences your agency contacts.

By adhering to these principles, federal agencies can leverage SMS as a powerful solution for enhancing user engagement without the risk of being perceived as spam.

Building SMS/Text Messaging Strategies into Communications Plans

Like most consumer-facing technologies, SMS has evolved to increase ease-of-use.

A key advantage of SMS is its ability to deliver personalized experiences. Government agencies can send targeted messages based on individual needs and preferences by integrating SMS with existing databases and CRM systems. Advanced platforms allow integration across email, SMS, social media, and other channels, enabling a seamless flow of messaging and data to support outreach strategies.

With two-way SMS/text, agencies can further drive personalization to remove barriers across the customer journey by analyzing and using data capture to identify where a customer is in a process and then providing the next most valuable piece of information.

Cutting-edge technologies like data mesh architecture, artificial intelligence (AI), and machine learning (ML) can also be employed to enable scale, security, and personalization, even with massive outreach campaigns. These technologies can optimize content delivery, enhance conversational experiences, and ensure data is protected and used efficiently. Two-way conversational SMS, powered by AI/ML, now has natural-language processing, allowing the exchange to become more intuitive and conversational.

Tip: Start small and begin with specific, manageable use cases to avoid overwhelming complexity. Start with a simple feedback survey before expanding to more intricate interactions.

Effective text messaging reflects individual needs, preferences, goals, motivations, and constraints. If possible, learning about demographic, socioeconomic, and even family characteristics can help better target messaging.

Tip: Study your audiences and ask basic questions to develop a tailored plan that considers each individual's journey.

Much of this data is collected from users during the enrollment process. Using a scalable digital communications platform, you can immediately leverage AI and ML capabilities in a data mesh architecture, allowing you to incorporate data from multiple sources and create a more complete picture of the people with whom you're communicating, the messages they want to hear, and the channels and tempo they prefer.

Know the types of SMS messages

In order to best integrate any new form of communications, like SMS, it should complement and support the goals of existing strategies for maximum message saturation. While SMS may require more content concision than other communications tactics, there are a variety of ways it can be integrated into existing campaign messaging. Understanding the types of common SMS messages will make it easy to use existing campaign messaging in a targeted, direct, and personal way for users to easily understand the importance of your messages and encourage participation.

Any type of text message can be optimized for interactivity. Understanding these common message categories, however, will help narrow focus and targeting:

Promotional

- Inform constituents about program details that might not require immediate action.

- Convey program benefits or overviews of services.

- Direct users to a website or external resource to find more information.

Example: "Discover new healthcare benefits available to you. Visit [shortened URL] for more details."

Reminders

- Automate text reminders with important dates and deadlines.

- Increase participation in programs and encourage users to keep program requirements front of mind.

Example: "Reminder: Your appointment with the Social Security office is tomorrow at 10 AM."

Subscription benefits

- Understand the topics that spark interest to increase subscription rates.

- Use a text-to-subscribe message within outreach campaigns to compel individuals to subscribe directly from the text message to continue receiving valuable related information.

Example: "Stay informed about job opportunities in your area. Reply 'YES' to subscribe to weekly updates." more details."

Support calls to action

- Prompt actions, such as creating an account or calling a phone number for more information. This reduces the burden on call centers and helps constituents complete complex processes correctly.

- Encourage constituents to focus on the immediate need for action.

- Clarify the benefit for taking action and the lost opportunity for inaction.

Example: "Enroll now in the energy assistance program to reduce your utility   bills. Apply here: [shortened URL]."

Exchange information

- Promote program and service benefits.

- Answer questions throughout the digital service adoption process.

- Alleviate barriers to enrollment by assisting with the application and enrollment process.

Example: Constituent texts "How do I apply for veterans' benefits?" Automated response: "You can apply online at [shortened URL] or visit your local office."

Gather feedback

- Gather real-time user input to evaluate your agency's service delivery and improve interactions.

Example: "How was your experience with our online services? Reply with a rating from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent)."

Understand tone and language differences

Messages received on a personal device and in more of a push fashion offer a different experience from a computer. Because of this change in dynamic, the tone and the content of the messaging should reflect that context.

Follow these tips to create a personalized two-way text experience that can boost engagement and reaffirm intent.
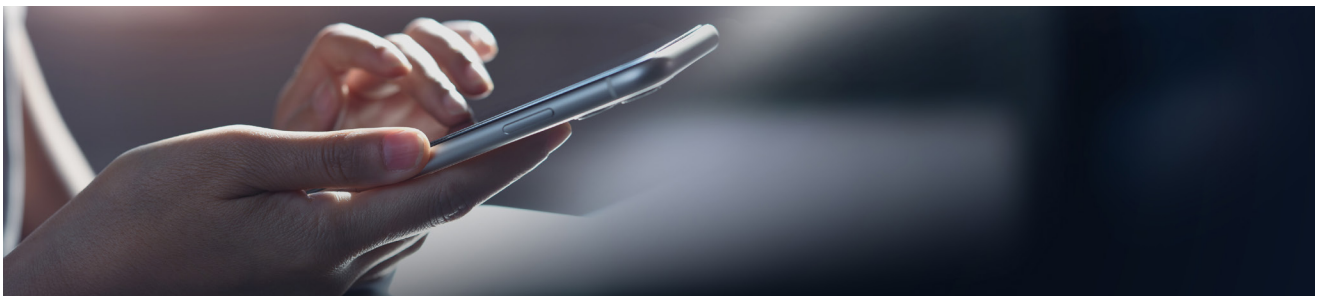
1	2	3	4
Create concise messages	**Include essential information and be clear about next steps**	**Analyze response data**	**Balance professionalism with a friendly tone**

Be intentional with timing and delivery cadence

The timing and frequency of your messages play a crucial role in how they are received and acted upon.

» **Optimal timing:** Send messages at times when constituents are most likely to be receptive. Avoid early mornings or late nights unless it's an emergency.

» **Frequency management:** Determine an appropriate cadence to keep constituents informed without overwhelming them.

» **Automate where appropriate:** Use automation for timely reminders and follow-ups to ensure consistency.

Track and assess

Analysis is a major factor for determining success in an SMS/text plan. Assessment can be as simple as noting whether enrollments increased in a specific timeframe after messaging was deployed.

Tip: Use digital tools such as approved URL shorteners to track URLs sent through SMS/text. Advanced digital platforms provide insights by tracking interactions, gathering feedback, and analyzing patterns across multiple outreach channels.

Track open rates, response rates, and opt-out rates to gauge the effectiveness of your messages.

When developing an overall communications strategy about program enrollment awareness, include methods to track, measure, and improve effectiveness. Advanced analytics, such as bulletin performance and website analytic calculations, along with data pipelines and dashboard templates, can provide a holistic view of outreach efforts.

Tip: Create a conversational text experience to conduct follow-up surveys. These can help provide insight into the digital service adoption experience.

The road forward

SMS messaging provides government organizations with a means of broadening their public engagement channels in a way that can prompt immediate action, increase awareness, and strengthen relationships and trust. Multichannel communication strategies increase efficacy because flexible, diverse messaging can reach communities that might be left behind by less equitable channels. When done properly, SMS overcomes the assumption of spam, becoming a critically important tactic that can impact specific audience segments.

Thanks to advanced digital communications solutions that offer robust features and integrations, implementing SMS/text messaging tactics offers a high benefit-to-cost ratio that allows governments to easily broaden their reach and improve their outcomes.

Reach out today   **Get in Touch**

Implementing an effective SMS strategy can transform your agency's communication efforts, driving higher engagement and better outcomes. Embrace the power of SMS to connect with your constituents like never before.