



STATE & LOCAL SMS GUIDE

Best Practices for SMS in Government Outreach Strategies

Concise, Real-time, Action-Oriented, and Personal Communications.





Introduction

Digital services have provided state and local governments with the tools and philosophical shifts to better connect with people 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, SMS/text messaging, and two-way SMS/text messaging.

While traditional SMS allows organizations to send one-way messages to residents, two-way SMS enables interactive communication, fostering engagement and building stronger relationships. So why should state and local governments use SMS?

1

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

2

Increased Audience Reach: Communicate with people 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 residents' needs.

4

Personalized Interaction: It enables personalized communication, making people feel valued and understood.

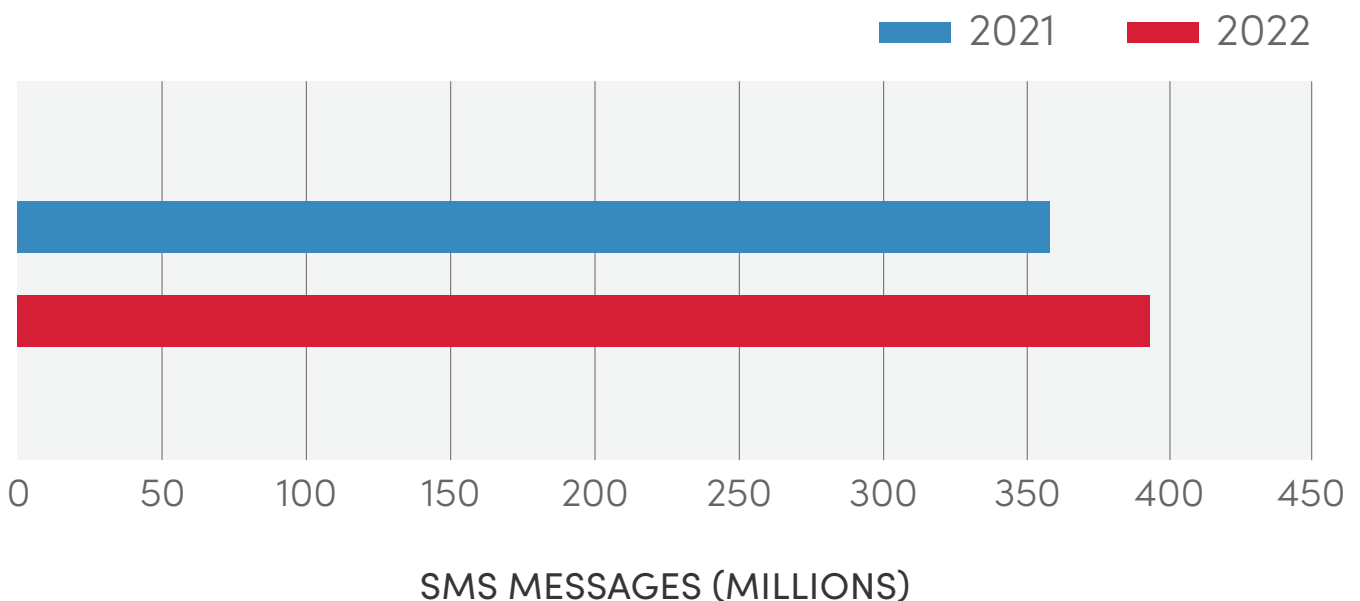
These alternative methods provide a cost-effective way to increase outreach effectiveness while encouraging participation and program adoption as messages reach audiences where they are most likely to see them and act. The public has grown increasingly reliant on mobile devices over the last decade,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

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 into your communications. With the tips and samples provided, you can supercharge the impact of your engagement strategy.

Change in State & Local Agency Use of SMS



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 residents 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 each audience.

By adhering to these principles, state and local governments can leverage SMS to enhance user engagement without the risk of being perceived as spam.



Building SMS/Text Messaging Strategies into Communications Plans

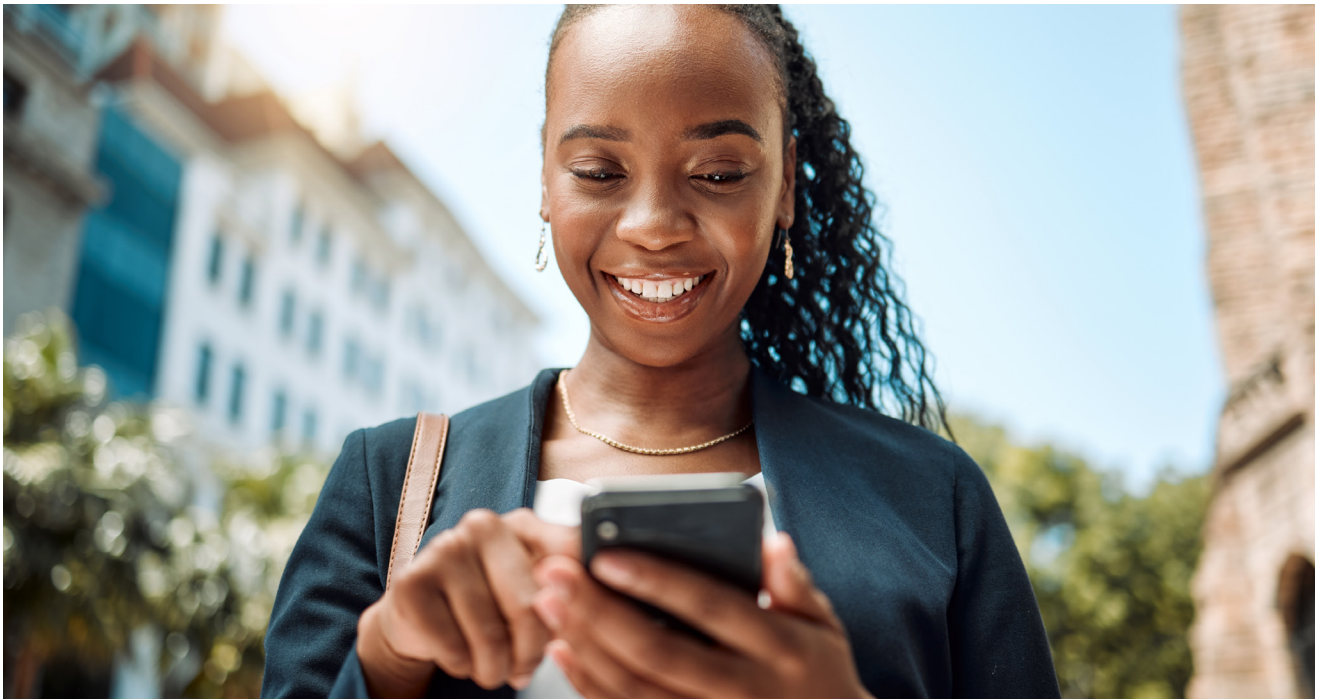
Like most consumer-facing technologies, SMS has evolved to increase ease-of-use.

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, state and local 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 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, making the exchange 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 everyone'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 fuller 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

SMS should be integrated to complement and support the goals of existing strategies for maximum message saturation. While SMS might require more concise content than other communications tactics, there are a variety of ways it can be integrated into existing campaign messaging. Any SMS message can be optimized for interactivity.

Promotional

- Inform constituents with program details that may not require immediate action.
- Convey program benefits or overviews of services.
- Direct people 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 of important dates and deadlines.
- Increase participation in programs and encourage users to keep program requirements front of mind.

Example: "Reminder: Your appointment with the Department of Motor Vehicles 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 communications to compel people to subscribe directly from the text message.

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

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 people complete complex processes correctly.
- Encourage residents 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 Commercial Driver's License training program. 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 a business license?” 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. The tone and the content of the messaging should reflect that context. Creating a personalized two-way text experience can boost engagement and reaffirm intent.

1

Create concise messages

2

Include essential information and be clear about next steps

3

Analyze response data

4

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 subscribers 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 people 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 the means to broaden 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 platforms 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 government's communication efforts, driving higher engagement and better outcomes. Embrace the power of SMS to connect with your residents like never before.