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# Shedd lures contestants with text message

By: [Rita Chang](#) Sept. 21, 2009

(Crain's) — SMS may lack sizzle, but it can deliver the goods if provoking your audience to action is the goal, as Chicago's Shedd Aquarium recently discovered from its summer test campaigns.

To herd visitors to its new Fantasea aquatic show, Shedd Aquarium put a couple of direct-response tactics to the test to see if consumers preferred SMS or web-based calls to action.

At the end of 30-second spots that aired on Chicago's NBC, ABC, CBS and Fox affiliates, the aquarium announced a contest with prizes that included a hotel stay and VIP seats for the Fantasea premiere. The commercials were identical across the networks except for the calls to action: All the ads directed viewers to a Web site to register for the contest, except one spot, which gave viewers an additional mobile option to enter the contest by sending a text message to a special code.

The SMS call to action generated 325% more entries than the web-based call-to-action, making up 52% of the total entries, though it ran in only 25% of the ads.

To Shedd's assistant marketing director, Jay Geneske, the results show that the "phone is always with you, it's nearby and immediate," even when you're watching TV. Shedd also ran a one-day print campaign in a local paper with a text call-to-action, yielding the highest or near highest number of responses for a single-day print piece, Mr. Geneske said.

"SMS reveals a greater sense of urgency," said Jed Alpert, founder of Mobile Commons, the technology company that managed the campaign's SMS piece. "It's more actionable and convenient, and people have a more direct connection with their phones."

Additionally, when people are watching TV, they're more likely to have their cellphones near them than a computer.

## Fresh impressions

"The mobile phone gives the consumer the ability to respond to the advertisement in real time, while the impression is still fresh in their heads," said Aaron Watkins, a former mobile-marketing agency executive turned independent consultant.

To get consumers to respond via the web, on the other hand, means they not only have to be interested in the ad but need to recall the website address later if they were not near a computer when the ad ran. The likelihood that they will remember the address drops "exponentially," given the nonstop barrage of messages and media that hit people every day, Mr. Watkins said.

Mobile works best when overlaid with mass media such as TV and radio, because they radiate that much more reach, compared to, say, mobile apps or display banners, Mr. Alpert said.

More than 90% of U.S. handsets are SMS-capable, with the number of text messages starting to outpace voice calls in 2007, according to Nielsen.

For consumers to text in, however, the offer has to be compelling and valuable, whether it's entertainment, information or access to something special. Shedd's campaign worked well because the short code was part of the narrative and script, rather than an afterthought of just slapping a code at the end of the commercial.

Mr. Alpert said it cost Shedd less than \$10,000 to trial SMS in its TV campaigns. Given the relatively low outlay, marketers may want to consider SMS trials in their out-of-home and broadcast campaigns if for nothing else than to capture users for their mobile-marketing database. Mr. Alpert said over the hundreds of mobile campaigns his agency has managed, an average 85% of those who opt into a campaign will respond to more requests for information, such as age and ZIP code.

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