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SMS + TV = Teachable Moment

by [Steve Smith](#), Yesterday, 11:15 AM

As soon as the aging Duck Phillips swooped into the youngster Peggy Olson's face for the big kiss on "Mad Men" Sunday night, my cell phone started buzzing with special emphasis. My daughter was watching the same episode at her mother's house and the SMS exchange commenced. And I quote: "EEEEEEEEWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW!! CREEP ALERT CREEP ALERT! WHAT IS PEGGY THINKING?"

My daughter seems to identify with Peggy, Sterling Cooper's lone woman copy writer. But she is getting increasingly confused by Peggy's behavior this season. Since I still don't get "SpongeBob Square Pants," "Mad Men" is our shared media experience, so dutiful Dad does his best to make the best of it. After a few exchanges on the general "creepiness" of the scene and a flurry of "Ugh"s and "EEWWWW"s when Peggy and Duck cut to the bedroom, I overreached and tried to make it a teachable moment. "What do you think she is after?" I text. "I don't even know -- I'm lost," she replies. So I offer an explanation of her character to seed the discussion and quickly realize I just violated a basic tenet of tandem SMS/TV repartee. Dead silence.

Oops. I had asked her to think. She was just *reacting*, and that is what this parallel texting experience is about. Anyway, I was put on notice a long time ago. Whenever I try to elevate media discussions to the level of analysis, she sniffs out the former college professor in a heartbeat. "Dad, no seminars tonight, okay?"

But the marriage of TV with SMS is more profound than any one of us would have guessed just a few years ago. Text exchanges form the connective tissue between remote locations during a shared media experience. I know that some cable TV networks have already tried to leverage this phenomenon by creating mobile chat rooms around a TV show. My guess is that like all things mobile, the most important activity is really going on one-to-one. How media marketers get into that flow is anyone's guess, but I would love to see someone research the amount of SMS activity that is going on in parallel to televised events.

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This all goes to show that mobile phones are becoming more of a "second screen" than the PC. The likelihood that we will interact with or around TV content via our cell phone seems greater than the likelihood we will resort to the nearby laptop. In a recent experiment by the mobile marketing firm Mobile Commons, an on-air campaign for Chicago's Shedd Aquarium was pushing viewers to get more information. "They had a problem that a lot of brands have," says Anthony Risicato, CEO, Mobile Commons. "They had something new to promote and didn't just want an awareness campaign. They wanted to sell tickets."

The campaign joined awareness with a call to action -- moving people to the opportunity to buy tickets via a contest to win VIP tickets. Three of the local stations ran ads that pushed a Web site URL while a fourth asked viewers to send a keyword to an SMS short code. The TV ad with the SMS prompt generated 325% more contest entries. "We were astonished by it," says Risicato. SMS entries from one out of four TV spots made up 52% of the entries. The company also ran print and outdoor ads with both URL and SMS prompts -- and the SMS entries still ran over 50% of the entries.

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STEVE SMITH

Contributing writer Steve Smith is a lapsed academic who saw the light, bolted the University and spent the last decade as a digital media critic and consultant. He is chair and programmer of OMMA Mobile and OMMA Behavioral conferences from Mediapost and is the Digital Media Editor at Media Industry Newsletter (MIN) from Access Intelligence. Contact him [here](#).

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Curiously, the on-air SMS prompt in this ad worked despite itself. The TV spot they showed me suffered from a very common problem in this format: the mention is too brief and fleeting. By my count, the rapid-fire delivery of the keyword and short code occupied all of three to four seconds on screen during a 30-second ad. That is just too brief.

Perhaps my being as old as Duck Phillips hampers my short-term memory, but I don't think calls to action should work like flash cards and memory games. My guess is that like radio, a local spot like this benefits from frequency, giving the viewer a few shots at catching the short code. Digital calls to action like SMS and URL prompts have always struggled to get a piece of the on-air action. The traditional impulse in making a spot is to emphasize the product and the branding effect, so the digital teams have to canvass for the few seconds they get. Nevertheless, even with these nearly subliminal messages, the SMS prompt worked.

This is the kind of case study that not only advances the argument for mobile but even makes it seem stupid to exclude a mobile component. Users like my daughter have effectively made the phone into a parallel channel for TV viewing. It is up to media and marketers to figure out how best to program that second screen.

You guys better handle the SMS programming -- because clearly I have trouble just keeping my own daughter on a text thread.

"I'm just saying, Peggy keeps misreading the cues she thinks she sees in this world of men."

"Huh? I am trying to watch this now"

"Just saying, what do you think she is trying to achieve?"

"DAD! Just STOP"

I think my daughter just used the MMA-prescribed universal command to *unsubscribe* her father.



This commentary is insightful. I recommend it to others.

28 people recommend this article.

6 comments on "SMS + TV = Teachable Moment"



[Dean Procter](#) from [Transinteract](#)

commented on: October 01, 2009 at 7:09 PM

I'm a bit past the SMS bit. Unless SMS's are free it won't have legs for the majority of the population. The epiphany occurred to me quite some time ago -- what if you could connect the web, (all)phones and (all)TV/Radio and stores all together and it didn't cost the consumer an extra cent to participate and there was no 'push'(y) involved? Now that has legs. I'm walking on them at the moment, be running soon.



[Paula Lynn](#) from [Who Else Unlimited; hollywood5459@gmail.com](#)

commented on: October 01, 2009 at 6:41 PM

Thanks Steve. And you know the times you turned around and said that you thought she wasn't listening?



[Steve Smith](#) from [Mediapost](#)

commented on: October 01, 2009 at 1:44 PM

Paula opens the door to pitching Mediapost's fantastic Mad Blog. I love it as do many of her devoted readers and responders. She does a great deep read of every episode. I would offer it to my daughter but her eyes would glaze over and she would just declare -- "on, no. there are others out there just like you."



[Paula Lynn](#) from [Who Else Unlimited; hollywood5459@gmail.com](#)

commented on: October 01, 2009 at 1:40 PM

Steve, wonderfully analyzed, the thing about Peggy. In addition, it not just that she is misreading, her education is so totally lacking how to read the cues. Not long after Don reemed her out, she took it personally, was confused and acted out with the first person of seniority who flattered her. She's hurting. You may want to direct your daughter to the Mad Blog here. Dorothy Parker is terrific. The NYT has a great one, too. These will help with her questions.



[Uriah Av-Ron](#) from [Oasis Public Relations](#)

commented on: October 01, 2009 at 1:18 PM

Enjoyable and informative piece, as always.


The importance of texting / Twitter to TV was made in a recent NY Times piece about the implementation of Twitter in FIOS TV:

The Twitter service has been a hit, with more than a million FIOS customers using it within the first three days. But Mr. Zafar mistakenly believed that people wanted to read tweets on the TV and use their computers to send them.

"We didn't allow people to send tweets from their remotes," he said. "We thought you mostly lean back and want to see what other people say. In four hours after the product went live, we had hundreds of requests, 'Can I tweet on the TV now?'"

Within two days, Verizon added that feature: users tap out messages on the number pad on the remote as if they were sending a text message on an older cellphone.

And here's a link to the complete article: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/07/business/07cable.html?_r=1

 **James Briggs** from **Briabe Media**
commented on: October 01, 2009 at 12:47 PM

Great piece. This is clearly a part of mobile marketing that the US market has failed to fully comprehend. Rather than just a text 2 win or text 2 vote vehicle, mobile could be an exciting and innovative way to bring consumers and advertisers together while improving a program.

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