



For more information contact

David Montez

Email: montezd@intermedia.org

Phone: 202-434-2271

SMS For News and Information in Zambia - Who Gets It, and Who Shares What They Get

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Spreading important development-oriented information via SMS has become an increasingly popular dissemination tactic among domestic and international development organizations. This method has been adopted by numerous health and agricultural education initiatives. In Zambia, we find an expanding mobile communications market with a number of opportunities for using SMS as a development tool. However, there still remain some significant barriers to its use.

The AudienceScapes survey of Zambia, conducted in spring 2010, revealed three main factors determining whether an individual regularly uses SMS as a news source: the person's location (urban vs. rural), level of education and whether he or she owns a mobile phone.

Education plays a part because a minimum level of functional literacy is needed for a mobile consumer to sign up for or access SMS messages. Respondents with a secondary education were twice as likely as those with a primary education to say they receive SMS news and information.

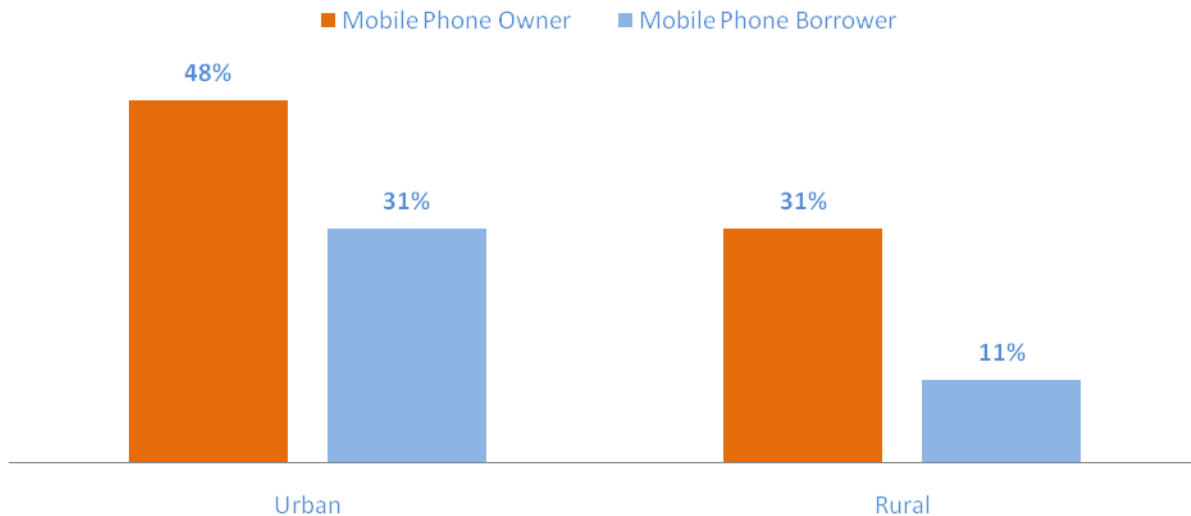
About 28 percent of respondents who are mobile phone users (weekly users) said they used their phone to access formal news and information via SMS at least once a month, and 15 percent said they do so at least weekly.

There is also a substantial divide in SMS news and info use between rural residents and urbanites. In general, about 22 percent of urbanite mobile phone users surveyed said they receive these types of messages at least weekly, while only 9 percent of rural users did. This gap remains wide even when the comparison is confined to daily mobile phone users and the divide holds regardless of income or education level.

Phone owners are well over twice as likely as non-owners to access SMS news at least weekly. This gap widens for those who use a mobile phone less frequently. Zambians who own a mobile phone have the advantage of possessing a personal phone number in which they can join SMS listservs and of course they have the freedom to access their phone whenever needed.

Zambia: Impact of Mobile Phone Ownership on the Use of SMS News and Information

% of weekly mobile phone users who get news and info via SMS at least weekly



AudienceScapes National Survey of Zambia April 2010: survey of adults (15+) who use a mobile phone at least weekly n=1010

The Knowledge Factor - Do They Know It Exists?

To inform mobile phone users about SMS-based information services, it is crucial that organizations also exploit traditional media outlets to make their target audience aware of the service.

Beyond these factors, differences in SMS news use between urban and rural residents may simply be knowledge. Urban mobile phone borrowers are equally as likely to access information via SMS as those in rural areas who own a mobile phone, as the above chart shows. This indicates either a large gap in service or a lack of effort to sensitize mobile phone users to information services. Understandably, rural residents in our survey are in general less likely to be high media consumers compared to urban dwellers, making rural people less exposed to information campaigns promoting SMS services.

To inform mobile phone users about SMS-based information services, it is crucial that organizations also exploit traditional media outlets to make their target audience aware of the service. With the growing prevalence of scams perpetuated via SMS, lower income Zambians are logically less likely to sign up for or even trust SMS updates if they do not know anything about the service.

Word-of-mouth is another crucial conduit for informing target audiences about a new service. It is also often the most difficult to exploit. Some 50 percent of low-income respondents and 57 percent of those with a primary education reported getting news and information from other people in their community (apart from their friends and family) at least weekly. **Mobile kiosk operators and local mobile phone content and service providers have the potential to be conduits for mobile communication information in communities. These community actors are often the most likely individuals to know how to troubleshoot when a phone malfunctions or to be that crucial interlocutor who helps transfer top-up credits between phones. Being able to identify and inform these formal and**

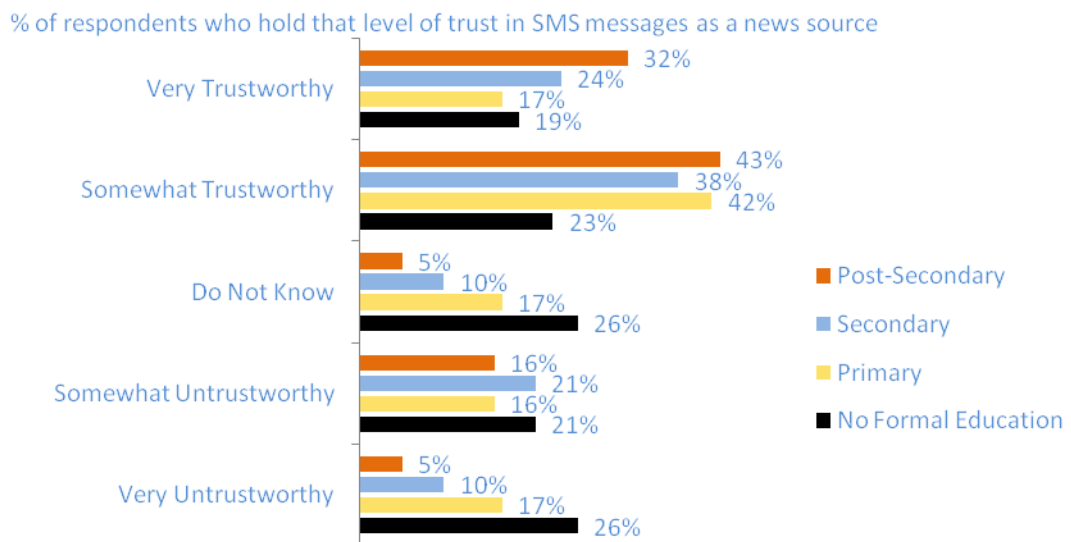
informal service providers about a SMS-based or other mobile-based service can go a long way in reaching a target audience.

A Question of Trust

The demographic groups who expressed the highest levels of trust in SMS-delivered news and information tended to overlap the groups who were more likely to be frequent mobile phone users and weekly SMS news receivers. Chart 2 shows that Zambians with less education (and presumably less familiarity with the SMS news concept) showed lower trust levels (or simply replied “Do Not Know”).

There was little difference in trust levels between urban and rural respondents among those who have familiarity with the SMS news concept. This suggests that rural mobile phone users and the less privileged will take up these services or have greater trust in them, the more they are exposed to them.

Zambia: Trustworthiness of SMS as a News and Information Source



AudienceScapes National Survey of Zambia April 2010: survey of adults (15+) n=1226, excludes those who have not used SMS as a news and information source

Spreading the Word: Forwarding SMS Messages

Word-of-mouth networks have always been important conduits for spreading information within a society. Whether or not these networks are replicated through mobile communications remains an important question for the field of development communication. If SMS message exchanges develop similar patterns as familial or communal word-of-mouth networks, then mobile communications have the potential to be an extremely important means of sharing important development information.

In order to further explore the potential of SMS messages as an information dissemination tool, the AudienceScapes survey asked about forwarding of SMS news messages - notably and how frequently respondents did so and what message topics they tend to forward.

The results show that SMS forwarding remains rather limited among regular mobile phone users. A little over a quarter of all weekly mobile phone users, 27 percent, reported receiving SMS messages (both from formal and informal sources) regarding news and information. Of this group only 25 percent said that they forward these messages to other people either “often” or “always”. Thus, SMS forwarders cover only about 7 percent of all weekly mobile phone users. Some 44 percent of weekly mobile users who receive SMS news said they “never” forward a message. Another 30 percent said they do so “rarely”.

Demographically, 64 percent of SMS forwarders are between the ages of 15 and 29, 69 percent are male, and 94 percent have at least some secondary education. Predictably, a vast majority of the group are more affluent, with some 72 percent residing in either an upper middle or high-income household. In other words, it is still only the more privileged demographic groups who are willing to incur the cost of sending on a received SMS. Again there is room to believe that the habit will spread, given that mostly young people forward messages now, and the cost of mobile communications continues to decline in Zambia as new competition is due to enter the market.

Respondents were given the opportunity to list what type of news and information they typically forward to other people. Each respondent was allowed to name three topics, and the results showed a great range of preferred subjects. The topics that garnered the most attention were current affairs with 23 percent of responses, sports with 17 percent and promotions with 15 percent. Other less popular topics were entertainment, business, and politics.

The AudienceScapes project (www.audiencescapes.org) is aimed at bridging knowledge gaps about media preferences, personal communication habits and the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in Africa and in other developing regions. It is also a tool for identifying needs in media, communication technologies, development information and development policy.

The project’s name refers to the benefits for development organizations of understanding the changing communication preferences and needs of their ‘audiences’—the target populations and policymakers whom they are trying to support. Launched in April 2009 with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation*, AudienceScapes comprises four main elements:

InterMedia (www.intermedia.org) is a nonprofit research, evaluation and consulting company with expertise in media, communications and development. We creatively equip clients to understand audiences, design projects, target communications and gauge project impact in developing and transitional societies worldwide.

**The findings and conclusions of the AudienceScapes research project are those of InterMedia and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.*