Email, Text or ICQ? Just Call Me.

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Introduction

Email, SMS (Short Message Service) text messages and ICQ are new textual communication technologies. This research explores and compares consumer usage and attitudes to the three technologies, with a view to identifying their marketing implications.

Background
Email

There were 891 million email accounts at the end of 2000 (Messaging On Line 2000), an increase of 57% on 1999. Forrester (Niall 2000) describes email marketing as one of the most effective online marketing tools, and expects email marketing to be worth $5bn by 2004.

SMS

It is predicted that within three years, worldwide there will be 100 billion SMS messages per month, this equates to three SMS messages per day, per mobile phone user. SMS has been described as the 'killer application' of m-commerce, (Quios/Engage 2000).

ICQ

There are more than 78 million registered users of AOL's Buddy List, Instant Messenger and ICQ who send more than 760 million messages each day, (Cyberatlas 2001). ActiveBuddy project that 90% of Internet users will use Instant Messaging by 2003, and claim there are currently 5½ million corporate users (Goddard, 2001).

3 business models – customer service, marketing ie sponsorship or advertising or own branded service e.g. MTV . FAO Schwarz has released a partly automated I.M. buddy named ShopFAO that answers questions about its toys. Radiohead, the alternative rock band, has set up an I.M. buddy that offers information about concerts and plays Radiohead music on request. If asked, it will also read your horoscope (Guernsey, 2001) Eurobank uses Instant messaging at call centres to enable representatives to handle several calls at once. Aol and Gateway both use it for customer service troubleshooting. It is cost effective but much more personal and interactive than email as it is synchronous. Reuters are also developing a service for their corporate financial service customers.

Kit Kat have been sponsors MSN Instant Messenger, MSN claims that the average exposure is 184 minutes per user per month.

Methodology

Focus groups will be used because this method facilitates the identification and interrogation of experience. Groups are not intimidating for respondents, and shared experiences 'spark off' others, (Gordon and Langmaid 1988). Focus groups "….can be especially useful for topics where people are not in touch with or able to articulate their motivations, feelings and opinions", or where "researchers wish to understand (behaviours) that are not a matter of conscious importance in everyday life", (Morgan 1998 p. 58).

Four 1½-hour single sex focus groups will be held. The 32 respondents will be between 18 and 25, use the Internet at least five hours per week, have mobile phones and regularly use a form of ICQ. The groups will be split male/female and free vs. paid for Internet calls. The researcher, who is an experienced moderator, will lead the groups.

Discussion will include:
1. Background frequency/quantity and length of usage of each technique
2. Spontaneous advantages and disadvantages of each method
3. Content – appropriate subject matter for the technology, emotional/personal content
4. Usage under which circumstances are the different techniques used? Social/formal role
5. Role of costs/opportunity costs in choice of medium.
6. Importance of synchronicity/asynchronicity
7. Paired or group communication
8. Importance of location and immediacy
9. Netiquette: communication norms and language
10. Multitasking
11. Viral behaviour and word of mouth
12. Cultural/social changes
13. Attitudes to commercial use

Conclusions

The research will explore and compare the constraints and conventions of the different communication technologies, and their effect on the nature of the communications and social interaction. It will also examine the assumptions made in Table 1, and explore the marketing implications of these technologies, e.g. diffusion of marketing communication, word of mouth, viral marketing.

Table 1: Comparison of Communication Technologies

	Telephone	*Email*	*SMS*	*ICQ*
Reach	Most households	Internet users	Mobile users	Approx % of Internet Users
Cost	20p? per min	Free/Call cost	10 - 5p	Free/call cost
Access	Home	Home & work	Everywhere	Home & work
Impact	High	Low	Medium- high	Medium - low
Personal	Yes	No	Medium	Medium
Formal	Yes	Yes	No	No
Emotional	Yes	No	No	Medium
Synchronous	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Several	No	No	No	Yes
Viral	No	Yes	Yes	Possible
Recorded	Not usually	Yes	Short lived	Not usually

Bibliography

Goddard Charlotte (2001), 'And Now a Message From our Sponsor' Revolution September 12th, pp. 28 – 30.

Guernsey, Lisa (2001) Advertising Invades Instant Messaging **New York Times June 28, 2001**