

Text to Change (TTC)

Country: Uganda

Sponsoring Organization and Partners:

Celtel, AIDS Information Centre (AIC), Merck, and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs



Spread the message stop the virus

The Project

Text to Change (TTC) provided HIV/AIDS awareness via an SMS-based quiz to 15,000 mobile phone subscribers during three months in Uganda. TTC was founded with the goal of improving health education through the use of text messaging, which holds the advantages of anonymity and strong uptake among the population. Partnering with the mobile carrier Celtel and the local NGO AIDS Information Centre (AIC), TTC conducted a pilot program from February through April 2008 in the Mbarra region of Uganda, with the objective of increasing public knowledge of and changing behavior around AIDS. The program aimed to encourage citizens to seek voluntary testing and counseling for HIV/AIDS.

An SMS-based multiple choice quiz was administered to 15,000 Celtel mobile phone subscribers in the rural region of Mbarra. Free airtime was offered to users to encourage participation in the program; this was determined to be a powerful incentive since users can exchange the airtime with other subscribers as a type of currency.

The quiz was interactive. When participants gave a wrong answer they received an SMS with the correct answer from the cell phone provider. The uptake rate of the survey was 17.4% and focused on two specific public health areas:

- General knowledge about HIV transmission
- The benefits of voluntary testing and counseling

At the end of the quiz, a final SMS was sent to motivate participants to go for voluntary testing and counseling at the local health center. Those who went to the center were asked a final question: Was this was the first time they had an HIV test? After testing, participants were requested to leave their mobile phone number so that post-test counseling could be arranged. For the people who came to the health centers through TTC, HIV testing and counseling was free of charge. Initial grants from Merck, the US pharmaceutical company, and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported the program launch.

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Forge Strong Partnerships

Successful mHealth projects require the participation of partners with expertise in the fields of technology, healthcare, and academia. Validation and testing are key steps in the conception of mHealth programs and this phase typically occurs within a university setting or a technical organization. In order to move to the implementation stage, however, it is essential to bring other partners into the project. Dr. Patricia Mechael of the Earth Institute notes that "The projects that have been implemented at significant scale have forged strong partnerships, either with a government or a private corporation." Mechael further affirms that the mHealth field currently finds itself in a place where a number of projects are in the design and testing phase that have not yet made the move to implementation. "As the diverse sectors involved in mHealth continue to collaborate and the corporate and political climate become more supportive we expect to see more projects move into the implementation phase."

Set Measurable Goals

As with any initiative, setting measurable goals establishes the barometer that allows mHealth projects to assess success or failure. It builds in the rigor that is required if course corrections are needed during the project. Once achieved, these goals, in turn, form the building blocks for success, allowing the project to move forward with larger implementations and broader partnerships.



Credit: Text to Change

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Objectives and Results

The quiz had two goals:

- Collect information. In particular, the program was able to assess the rate of correct or incorrect answers within certain socio-economic sectors, and pass this information along to UNICEF.
- Promote testing and counseling. The quiz notified participants of the location of the nearest testing center. If they stated that they were referred from the quiz, testing was free (there was normally a small charge for testing).

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In terms of information gathering, a key finding of the survey was that although people were quite knowledgeable about issues such as condom use, they did not think that AIDS testing was accurate or anonymous. This was a major finding, in that the population of Uganda had not been surveyed on this question before. TTC was able to pass this along to larger health agencies operating in the region, thereby contributing to the efficacy of existing health programs.

TTC co-founder Hajo van Beijma notes that “there was initially an element of risk for the funders since this type of project had not been conducted before, but now that we have proven results we have the opportunity to expand.” TTC is planning a follow-up program in Uganda in January 2009. One of the goals of this next campaign is to promote the safety and effectiveness of the testing center, and therefore specifically encourage testing.

In this phase, collaboration with local partners will be further strengthened, with the local HIV/AIDS organizations submitting questions. Text to Change intends to shorten the duration of the program to four weeks, hoping to minimize participant drop-out rates, and to include non-English speaking subscribers by enabling them to read SMS messages in their local languages.

The pilot saw the sponsoring partners benefit as well: Celtel (now rebranded Zain) reaps benefits not only from a corporate social responsibility (CSR) perspective but also through the promotion of its texting service. The testing center increased the number of tests conducted, placing them in a position to receive expanded funding.

Future Plans and Scaling Challenges

Hajo van Beijma hopes to build upon lessons learned from the pilot. He comments, “After the pilot we saw that our initial program didn’t have a good survey running. In the second round we developed a new survey with Ugandans, and used university students. Their IT knowledge is fabulous. They really know how to program these kinds of software tools in Uganda.”

The new program in January 2009 will target 30,000 people, and ultimately TTC plans to do a nationwide roll-out. Van Beijma notes, “If we are able to prove that we can send out a large number of questions, that will lay the groundwork for the nationwide program. In the first pilot there were some issues with being able to send out a large number of questions at the same time.”

Van Beijma cites several critical success factors for scaling Text to Change and similar mHealth projects. These include:

- Develop surveys in the numerous local languages. This would make their message more accessible to specific ethnic and social groups. Literacy is also an issue. However, van Beijma notes, “If people do not speak or read English and they get a text message they will ask their neighbor what it means.”
- Secure ongoing funding. Though TTC is more cost effective than many other education programs, steady funding will allow for stable operations and growth.
- Collaborate with other mHealth organizations. Van Beijma notes that one of the consensus findings of the recent MobileActive conference in South Africa (October, 2008) is the need to set up a consortium to promote collaboration among mHealth organizations in different developing countries. “The goal is to work with organizations that are doing similar and complementary things in different countries. This way if we move into other countries we will combine strengths, for example, by developing software together.”

