

# SELL, PHONE

By RICHARD MULLINS The Tampa Tribune

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They're stamped on cases of cola, painted on billboards and blared in radio commercials: short strings of numbers that companies desperately want you to tap into your cell phone.

They're called short codes, and they are one of the hottest ideas in advertising, blending the interest in cell phone text messaging with the holy grail of sales: direct engagement with customers.

The text message with the code can allow users to sign up for contests, get news updates on football teams or win coupons for free french fries.

More than 900 companies have minted short codes, including Comedy Central, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Facebook, Honda, American Airlines, Playboy, Frito-Lay, World Wrestling Entertainment and Merck.

Tribune partner TBO.com in May reserved the short code 82672, which spells "Tampa" on the phone keypad.

If your company doesn't have a short code yet, that may be a bad thing. Advertising experts predict a well-picked short code that spells a brand name could become as important as acquiring the right Web address.

"The biggest advantage is that everyone has their cell phone on them almost all the time," said Tad Clarke, who oversees publications at the research firm MarketingSherpa. Short code campaigns also can reach a coveted younger audience.

Some examples:

- Coca-Cola Co. prints the code 2653 (COKE) on packaging to entice customers to enter contests and win video games, trips, electronics and cell phone ring tones.
- Google's short code 466453 (GOOGLE) can lead users to information from local movie listings and directions to stock prices and language translations. Sending the message "Coffee 33606" prompts a listing of Tampa coffee shops.
- If you have a Verizon Wireless phone, send the message "Bucs" to the short code 1400, and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers will sign you up for news about the team.
- Popeye's Chicken & Biscuits tested a campaign recently in Houston in which customers could send the word "Popeyes" to the address 78247. Popeye's replied to the phone within 15 seconds with a coupon message for free fries and a drink. The offer attracted thousands of messages as customers shared the coupon code with friends.

### **Reach Everyone, Or Just Chicken Fans**

Such projects are gaining advertisement appeal on a variety of levels.

The first is audience reach. As of December, there are more than 228 million cell phones in use in the United States - and most have text message capability, which allows callers to respond to short code campaigns.

TBO.com uses its TAMPA short code to deliver breaking news (for an example, send the word "Break" to 82672), Buccaneers news, weather and weekend events.

"Untethered mobile news delivery allows our audience to not to have to worry about how they will get the news; the news comes right to their cell phone," TBO.com Marketing Director Tim Repshire said.

The second is focus. Interactive advertising and media campaigns can be highly targeted to engage specific groups, such as chicken-sandwich aficionados or fans of a particular TV show or sports team. Such digital campaigns also make measuring response simpler and more direct. Popeye's or Frito-Lay can determine precisely how many people used their coupons.

### **Cracking The Codes**

Cellular service providers and industry groups are trying to make it as easy as possible for companies to acquire and use short codes. The CTIA cellular industry association established an online signup system allowing companies or individuals to pick a code, pay for it in advance and find specialists in making the systems work.

Cell phone companies took a big step a few years ago by agreeing among each other on one common registration system for codes. That system prevents a scenario in which one code on Cingular, for instance, would overlap the same code on Verizon networks.

A randomly selected 5-digit code can cost \$500 per month. Specific "vanity" 5- or 6-digit codes that spell out words or brand names can cost \$1,000 per month. That price is well worth it to many companies, says David LaPlante, chief executive of digital marketing company Twelve Horses in Reno, Nev.

"There are a lot of parallels to the 1990s, when companies were trying to get the right Internet domain name for their Web site," LaPlante said.

LaPlante said major companies aren't betting their futures on short codes or planning to cancel billion-dollar television advertising campaigns in favor of cellular text messaging. Short codes, though, are catching the attention of more advertisers.

"This is one great way to have a channel of two-way communication with customers and to facilitate a dialogue and even do commerce with them - all through their phones," LaPlante said.

### **The Risk Of Spam**

As with any digital advertising campaign, there is some concern about how marketers will use the codes - or whether they might start sending "spam" messages to customers' cell phones.

Because the text messages come directly from phones, they contain information about the phone and its number. Theoretically, companies could retain that information for marketing calls later.

(If you receive spam messages on your phone, that doesn't mean you misused a short code. Most cell phone numbers also can receive e-mail, and spam marketers often send millions of such messages to random numbers, hoping to reach real people.)

The cellular industry association is encouraging companies to use their codes responsibly and be upfront with customers about the information these systems collect.

The CTIA industry association requires each participating company to offer an opt-in/opt-out system that allows phone users to end their participation in a program - such as news updates about the Buccaneers or text messages about dating services.

Applications for short codes also must be approved by each wireless company. Next year, CTIA will deploy a team of investigators to probe any complaints of spam and test out each code to ensure marketers are using codes appropriately.

"We've noticed a few bad apples out there," said Jeff Simmons, director of technology programs at CTIA. "But we do our best to move them out of the space, and it's really been a very, very healthy environment."

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