GUIDE

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Before You Hit Send

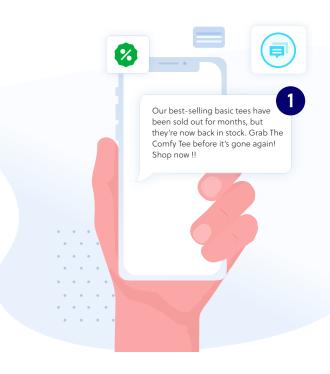Plivo's Guide to SMS Marketing Beyond the Message

Text marketing — it just works

We know the why of text marketing — high open rate, immediate engagement, it cuts through the clutter of email and other digital outreach. After all, if a person's phone is glued to the palm of their hand, it's much harder to ignore that text notification.

You may be familiar with best practices for crafting text message content — but do you know the nuances of phone number types, including which to use for different use cases? Do you know what to do if your messages aren't getting delivered?

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There's more to texting than what appears on the screen. Plivo, an expert in cloud communications, has been sending texts for over a decade on behalf of clients such as Byju's, Zomato, Mercado Libre, Zynga, Deckers, Zumiez, and Corner Store by Uber. We've put together this guide to help you understand the different types of messaging content, available number types, and some regulatory pitfalls to avoid.

Content type matters

The industry defines two main types of SMS content: person-to-person (P2P) and application-to-person (A2P).

Person-to-person (P2P)

P2P is conversational messaging in which a back-and-forth conversation takes place via text. P2P SMS is what most people imagine when they think of text messaging. It's conversational, and it takes place between real people, generally in real time. A one-on-one conversation between a customer and a support team member is an example of a P2P use case.

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Application-to-person (A2P)

A2P messaging involves an application sending large volumes of automated messages, typically sent by an organization or business to a subscriber. A2P messaging comes in three varieties:

- **Informational** messaging happens when a consumer gives their phone number to a business and asks to be contacted in the future.
  - Appointment reminders, welcome texts, and alerts fall into this category because the first text sent by the business fulfills the consumer's request.
  - A consumer should agree to receive texts when they give a business their mobile number.
- **Promotional** messaging occurs when a message is sent that contains a sales or marketing promotion.
  - Adding a call to action (such as a coupon code to an informational text) may place a message in the promotional category.
- **Transactional** messages are non-marketing messages that provide important information to customers.
  - Examples include messages such as one-time passwords, order confirmations, and shipping updates.

Seems simple enough? Not quite. If businesses want to send SMS messages to customers, they have to take into account legal and regulatory considerations. For example, senders of A2P SMS messages must obtain consent from recipients, and they must send messages from an approved SMS number type.

Different countries have different requirements and regulations regarding A2P SMS, so businesses must be aware of local rules. Failing to comply with legal and regulatory requirements can get your messaging blocked by your carrier.

Let's look at number types next.
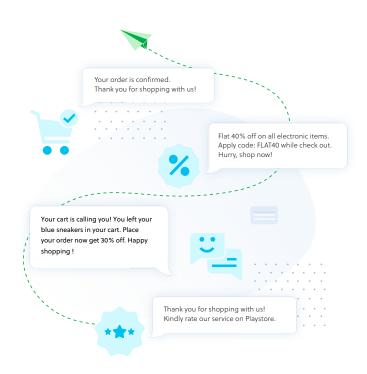
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Pick a number, (not just) any number

Phone numbers come in several varieties. All of them may be capable of sending text messages, but not all of them should send all types of messages.

Long codes

Long codes are familiar 10-digit phone numbers that enable you to engage in P2P conversational messaging. Long codes can send five messages per second, and carrier limitations mean you can't send more than 200 messages per day per long code number.

10DLC

10DLC (10-digit long code) is the newest service for business text messaging in the US. 10DLC explicitly allows A2P SMS traffic over registered long code phone numbers. Compared to unregistered long codes, 10DLC offers higher messaging throughput — up to 4,500 transactions per minute per number — and enhanced deliverability, because 10DLC use cases are approved by operators.

When should you use 10DLC?

10DLC is now the preferred number type for marketing messaging in the US. 10DLC allows you to send a higher volume of messages within a given time; throughput limits vary by carrier, but are in the neighborhood of tens of messages per second. Per-message costs for 10DLC messaging are reasonable and surcharges are lower.

To take advantage of 10DLC, you have to register your long code numbers with an organization called The Campaign Registry, which you should be able to do from your provider's dashboard. Once you're registered, your messages will not be throttled and will pass through less filtering, so 10DLC promotes higher deliverability.

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Toll-free numbers

Businesses began providing toll-free numbers to let customers reach them at no cost. Incoming voice calls are billed to the called party and are free of charge for the calling party. Most countries reserve a set of dialing prefixes, typically 1800 or 800, to denote toll-free services. In North America, 800, 888, 877, 866, 855, 844, and 833 area codes denote toll-free numbers.

Businesses can use SMS-enabled toll-free numbers to send text messages to opted-in customers.

When should you use a toll-free number?

You can use a toll-free number for A2P texting. In the US, in most cases 10DLC is a better choice because it's less expensive and offers higher messaging throughput. Toll-free numbers also take longer to procure due to the approval process required by carriers.

Short codes

Short codes are five- or six-digit numbers used to send and receive SMS messages. Unlike long code numbers, short codes are not tied to an area code, so they can be used across a country to provide a nationwide brand identity under one easy-to-remember number.

When should you use a short code?

A key benefit of short codes is high messaging throughput — up to 400 messages per second — so you can send more in a shorter space of time. Vanity short codes — ones whose numbers spell out a company name or other keyword, such as 75486 for Plivo or 827438 for Target — have the advantage of being easy to remember. Random short codes are also available, generally at a lower cost.

The use of short codes is changing. In the past, businesses could share short codes between multiple brands. That was tricky, because consumers could be confused when brands shared a short code. Also, if a brand used a short code in a way that violated their carrier's compliance regulations, the carrier could shut down the short code, affecting all the brands that shared it.

Today, if you want to use short codes for messaging, you need a dedicated short code for each brand. It can take eight to 12 weeks to provision a new short code — longer than the time for other phone number options.

Short codes are the only one of these number types that can't be used for voice calling.

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What about the cost?

Unless you need additional throughput as outlined above, our recommendation will almost always be to use 10DLC, but cost is also a factor you should consider.

There are three kinds of costs involved in messaging: one-time setup costs, monthly number rental costs, and cost per message. The table below outlines the costs for sending SMS messages through Plivo by number type.

	One-time setup costs	Monthly number rental	Cost* per SMS message sent starts at
10DLC	*$44 for brand and campaign registration and vetting*	*$0.50 plus $10 campaign charge*	*$0.005 plus carrier surcharge*
Toll-free	*None*	*$1*	*$0.0055 plus carrier surcharge*
Short code	*$1,500*	*$500 for random, $1,000 for vanity*	*$0.0045 plus carrier surcharge*

*Cost per message depends on several factors: whether you're sending or receiving messages, whether you're using SMS or MMS, and which carrier you use. Many carriers impose a surcharge on each message, which Plivo (and other CPaaS vendors) pass along to customers. Your vendor's pricing page can break it down for you.

Video Message

Picture Message

Audio Message

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The benefits of a messaging API

Once you've decided on the right number types for your use cases, you can rent the appropriate numbers. The next step is to integrate your numbers into your applications so you can automate sending and receiving SMS messages. You can do this with the help of a cloud communications platform — a communications platform as a service (CPaaS) — that provides an application programming interface (API) for handling SMS messages and a communications network through which messages get to their destinations.

A CPaaS SMS API provides a standard way of performing common operations such as sending and receiving messages. By using these APIs and their underlying communications network, developers are insulated from the complexity involved in interacting with all of the world's telecommunications networks. CPaaS providers offer software development kits (SDK) that let developers call their APIs from familiar languages like Java, Python, PHP, Ruby, and Go.

A CPaaS scales well, so it's suitable for any business, whether they send 20 or 200,000 messages a day. An SMS API can help you improve operational efficiency and customer experience by making it easier for you to communicate with customers at scale. That's an important goal for every company, since happier customers tend to be more loyal and generate more revenue — and smart businesses know that it's always cheaper to retain existing customers than to acquire new ones.

Pitfalls to avoid

While the benefits of a CPaaS and its messaging API and communications network should be obvious, businesses need to pay attention to legal and regulatory compliance issues as they roll out enterprise messaging. Partnering with a cloud communications provider gives business the support they need to help them avoid common SMS pitfalls.

Follow the rules

Carriers apply different rules and fees to the SMS traffic they deliver, and rules differ from country to country. For example, India bans promotional SMS messages after 8 p.m. In China, a company may not own a local SMS number but instead must register a static, 16-digit "virtual local number." Companies targeting international markets should look for a CPaaS provider with expertise in such rules and practices.

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Can spam

Another pitfall your CPaaS provider can help you avoid is having your messages look like spam. SMS recipients hate spam, so carriers work hard to protect their customers from it. They use in-network controls such as subscriber reputation analysis and advanced pattern detection to monitor the flow of messages across their systems and identify potential spam. When they detect it, they can respond in a variety of ways, from issuing warnings to blocking all messages from a given account.

Don't get SHAFTed

Certain topics are a sure-fire way to be blocked as spam. For example, in the US, so-called "SHAFT" rules forbid short-code messages that contain or promote sex, hate, alcohol, firearms, or tobacco and cannabis. Messages offering help dealing with the IRS or offering relief from mortgage or personal debt will be flagged, as will things like hate speech and job placement offers. In addition, certain kinds of links — for example long URLs, URLs from particular domains, and unusual-looking URLs — will raise concerns.

Follow the speed limit

US carriers also monitor the rate and frequency with which messages are sent, as well as the number of duplicate messages sent from the same number. The ratio of outgoing to incoming messages can be an indicator of spam, as can the rate at which recipients opt out of certain messages by replying "STOP." For example, if 5% of a company's inbound message volume is people opting out, that will trigger a carrier review; a 10% opt-out rate will cause the campaign to be blocked.

Message formats, carrier rules, country rules, spam — it can get complicated, especially since there are no comprehensive, published rules or guidelines that companies can simply read and follow.

Fortunately, you don't have to sort it all out on your own. Experienced SMS platform providers offer not only technology solutions but also expert guidance to steer around the obstacles.

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Which leads us to Plivo

Plivo's Premium Communication Network (PCN) serves a worldwide audience of voice and messaging customers. We have direct relationships with more than 1,600 carrier networks and connectivity in 190+ countries. Our strict evaluation process approves only carriers that meet the highest industry standards. To ensure top performance for customers in every region, we've established six points of presence (PoP) that correspond to internet exchange points (IXP) in every region around the globe. That means calls outside the local region are routed to their destinations with minimal latency, ensuring maximum message deliverability.

Top performance demands top reliability. We connect with at least two local or Tier 1 direct carriers in each country so we can eliminate multiple hops, lower the overhead of routing, reduce latency, and give our customers the best connections possible. Having multiple carrier connections also gives our customers built-in redundancy to ensure that, in the event of a carrier failure, all traffic is automatically routed through alternative carriers to minimize service disruption and quality degradation.

We also have software tools that let you take full advantage of our network. Powerpack, for instance, lets businesses send text messages efficiently and at scale. Think of it as a global routing and delivery system that spreads high-volume messaging traffic over several phone numbers for high delivery rates at the lowest possible cost. Plivo has built-in logic that automates the work of choosing numbers and sending messages for you, so you don't need to devote any developer resources to the task. All you have to do is build a number pool for Powerpack, from which Plivo will distribute your outbound messages.

You can opt in to any of Powerpack's automation features, including:

- **Sticky Sender**, which maintains the mapping of to and from phone numbers so you send messages to the same customer from the same phone number every time, and ensure a single conversation thread.

- **Local Connect**, which allows you to match the region or area code with your customer's phone number.

- **Smart Encoding**, which detects Unicode characters and replaces them with equivalent GSM-encoded characters when possible, saving you money.

- **Automatic Fallback**, which gives you the flexibility to set priority parameters by phone number type and assign some as fallback numbers, in case messages fail to be delivered.

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Our PCN delivers a number of practical benefits for our customers, including guaranteed CLI (caller ID) and instant phone number provisioning in every country. Because Plivo manages carrier relationships for our customers, we have a complete end-to-end view of every connection, so we can identify issues and work with carriers to get problems solved, sometimes before our customers even know something went wrong.

Global footwear giant Deckers, whose portfolio includes UGG, Hoka One One, Sanuk, Teva, and Koolaburra, quickly recognized the benefits of partnering with a CPaaS like Plivo. The California-based company's products are sold in department stores and online in more than 50 countries. With so many shipments, the company needed to make sure its customers knew where their orders were at all times, and "Plivo's queuing system was also a huge selling point," according to Jacob Martinez, Project Manager for Deckers' ecommerce team. "If we have 50,000 text messages we have to send, we don't have to worry about how those will get through. We just send them all and Plivo handles it."

The bottom line is: You're the marketing expert and we're the messaging experts.

About Plivo

For businesses of all kinds, Plivo offers a simple, fast, and scalable way to modernize customer communications. Thousands of businesses use Plivo to quickly integrate messaging and voice calling into their applications to deliver better customer experiences. The Plivo team brings deep communications and modern software development experience to address the needs of today's businesses — quality, scale, speed, and agility. Plivo has direct relationships with more than 1,600 carrier networks and connectivity in 190+ countries.

CONTACT US TODAY TO GET STARTED

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