

## Giving Voice to SMS

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### **At first blush, voice SMS sounds like glorified voice mail. But evangelists say it's actually adding emotion to SMS and more options for time management.**

To understand what voice SMS offers, it might be useful to cover what it's not. It's not push-to-talk (PTT), and it's not voice mail.

It can be viewed as a replacement for calling someone directly when you don't want to spend 10 minutes in a live conversation. For example, if you want to communicate with someone in another country and don't know the time zone, you can record an SMS in your own voice and send it for the recipient to listen to at his or her leisure. Or, if you want to let your boss know you're running late, you can record a quick voice SMS and be on your way rather than chatting when your attention should be on the road.

It's not for everyone. Using voice SMS requires some degree of user education. And so far, vendors of voice SMS solutions have garnered more success overseas than in the U.S. market, where carriers for the most part have not embraced it.

In 2004, Sprint began offering a voice SMS service using technology from Core Mobility, but that's about the extent of it. Still, voice SMS proponents are optimistic the time will come when the U.S. market will catch up to other parts of the world.

#### **"BUBBLE ME"**

One vendor in the space is finding that in some countries, part of its name is being used much like Google when it evolved into a verb in the U.S. market. Instead of saying the clunky: "I'll send you a voice SMS," subscribers who use the Bubble Motion solution are saying, "Bubble me" or "I'll Bubble you." The Bubble moniker is an offshoot of the bubbles that appear in cartoons. Marketing that uses a solution by Kirusa, another voice SMS vendor, espouses the virtues of sending a "Talky."



Whether it's a Bubble or a Talky, the systems work similarly. In Kirusa's case, a subscriber dials the star sign on a handset, punches in the person's number that he or she wants to call, hits send and speaks – in any language or a mix of languages.

"I could sing, be crying, shouting, saying a joke, whatever I like" for up to 30 seconds, says Kirusa CEO Inderpal Mumick. The recipient of the voice SMS receives a text message saying a voice message is waiting; no passwords or registration are required.

Thirty seconds of a spoken message can accomplish the same as five minutes of hammering out a text message, says Bubble Motion CEO Tom Clayton. Both Kirusa and Bubble Motion are going after the carrier community with their offerings, while other voice SMS companies, such as Pinger, are going direct to consumer.

Bubble Talk is live with about 130 million users worldwide, most of them in Asia but others coming online in Europe. Kirusa is working worldwide with at least a dozen carriers, collectively reaching about 100 million subscribers, but not all of its customers have yet launched. Kirusa, whose recently expanded Series C financing was led by Qualcomm Ventures, says voice SMS is the fastest-growing value-added service in Asia, with major deployments under way in other parts of the world.

#### **NO SUBSTITUTES, PLEASE**

While operators might be concerned that voice SMS is going to cut into their profits from regular-old SMS, Clayton says the service hasn't degraded SMS usage. Traffic patterns are similar to SMS, with high volumes from 6 p.m. to 1 a.m. Some end-users of the BubbleTalk service send thousands of voice SMS messages each month, or an average of 100 a day. The top user in one month last summer made 3,201 Bubble messages.

A few months ago, Clayton was seated on an international flight next to an American mother and her daughter. He explained the Bubble service to them and while the mother thought it was silly, her daughter immediately came up with various use cases for it. That youth market is what Bubble is going after, but Clayton also sees the day when the older generation, typically more accustomed to voice than text, will jump on board.

"We're focusing on the early adopters to get momentum, to get the snowball rolling," he says.

For the service to reach its greatest potential, intercarrier interoperability needs to be in place. Bubble Motion has been working with the GSM Association on that. Meanwhile, Bubble Motion is building up its Bubble Net to cover dozens of countries, so carriers with the Bubble service can work with other carriers that use an alternative voice SMS solution from another vendor.

Of course, this being a nascent industry with potentially big revenues, more than one company claims to be the pioneer of voice SMS. But Clayton says he doesn't foresee the voice SMS industry emulating what happened in mobile e-mail with regard to the number of companies fighting over patents and intellectual property rights (IPR). A lot of companies are jumping on the voice SMS bandwagon, but he estimates the serious competitors at less than a handful.

Other companies are adding voice SMS-like offerings to the mix as well. Kodiak Networks, best known for its push-to-talk (PTT) solutions, offers Visual Voice SMS, which is intended to augment SMS. Nuance Communications, widely recognized for its speech-to-text expertise, offers a product that delivers a spoken or dictated message as a traditional SMS, but the recipient doesn't know it was spoken; it comes across as if it originated as a text.

Nuance also is continuing on its path to incorporate its products as closely as possible with devices. Nuance Voice Control, available in North America through Sprint Nextel and Rogers Wireless, is a client-server application that allows the user to press the side button on a device, such as a BlackBerry, and speak commands, which can take the form of an SMS, an e-mail or be used for searching the Web, explains Hugo Barra, director of marketing at Nuance Mobility & Consumer Services. Of those who use the service, about 40% of the time, they're making a phone call, 35% is for searching the Web and 25% is for messaging.

#### **ROOM FOR ALL?**

Some companies not involved in the voice SMS market see it appealing to some segments. Voice SMS can be useful to convey emotion or for reaching markets outside the United States where certain text characters are not supported on the phone. "There's definitely a place for it," says Will Car, president and CEO of OceanLake Commerce, a mobile e-mail solution provider. He views voice SMS as a good complement to text messaging and doesn't see it competing with mobile e-mail.

It all boils down to usability and requiring as few steps as necessary for adoption to gain hold, Barra says. Not all services that succeed overseas make it in America. But voice SMS vendors aren't waiting for the U.S. market to take off, either. Clayton says he expects to see more activity in the United States in the coming year, but for now, his Mountain View, Calif., company is prioritizing its deployments to coincide with the countries that are showing the greatest demand and therefore, the largest number of potential users. "We have more demand than we can service right now," he says.

Sounds like the type of Bubble that deserves a shout.