

Free SMS to prompt swift response

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A GROUP of Australian advertisers are to pilot a world-first mobile phone SMS response system that allows customers to use free phone numbers to text message for brochures and product information and enter competitions.

Companies wanting to use SMS messages in their marketing have until now had to force customers to use premium rate numbers to respond to campaigns.

European-based TXT4 has been running SMS marketing modules for advertisers overseas for several years, but Australia will be the first market to allow customers to use SMS free.

TXT4 directors Anthony North and John Edwards said the company had found that many TV viewers now watched TV with their mobiles within easy reach and were more likely to SMS word prompts to a free number if they were interested in a product.

Mr North said response rates to ads where people were requesting material rose between 50 per cent and 100 per cent in test studies, with potential customers receiving information back on their phones instantly, tailored to both 2G and 3G handsets.

"What we are finding is that people think this is more convenient," he said. "They don't want to interrupt their viewing to go and send an email or call a customer response number, but they will SMS.

"We are talking about SMS as being an acquisition medium. In some cases we are seeing an increase of 150 per cent in lead generation."

The new technology also enables advertisers to utilise the growth in phone name marketing, where people use brand names or keywords instead of phone numbers. One example of the technology in action is a company such as Ford advertising on TV and asking people to text the word Focus to 13 FORD.

"You can use different keywords for different media and then you are able to accurately chart the response of each media," Mr North said.

Companies that have already used small market trials of the system include Ford, Dell, Foxtel, Tabcorp, and Virgin Money. The Australian Defence Force has also trialled it.

The Cancer Institute of NSW begins a trial next week using its QUIT campaign. Marketing director Trish Cotter said the impact of a response message could evaporate quickly when people were immersed in a TV show.

"What we are after is trying to maximise response to our advertising," Ms Cotter said. "We always give the opportunity to respond by calling the QUIT line but we know from experience they don't always call during a program that is interesting.

"What we are hoping is to get those who may not call straight away. But if they call, they double their chance of quitting. Sending an SMS is a lot quicker than making a phone call, so they can start the process straight away. You can do it all in the ad break."

The Cancer Institute also hopes the mobile nature of the campaign will pick up more young people.

Mr North said one of the challenges was that while companies were throwing more money at SMS marketing, he did not believe it was being utilised well enough.

"I don't think the mobile marketing industry even exists in Australia right now," he said. "Corporations are not yet taking it seriously."