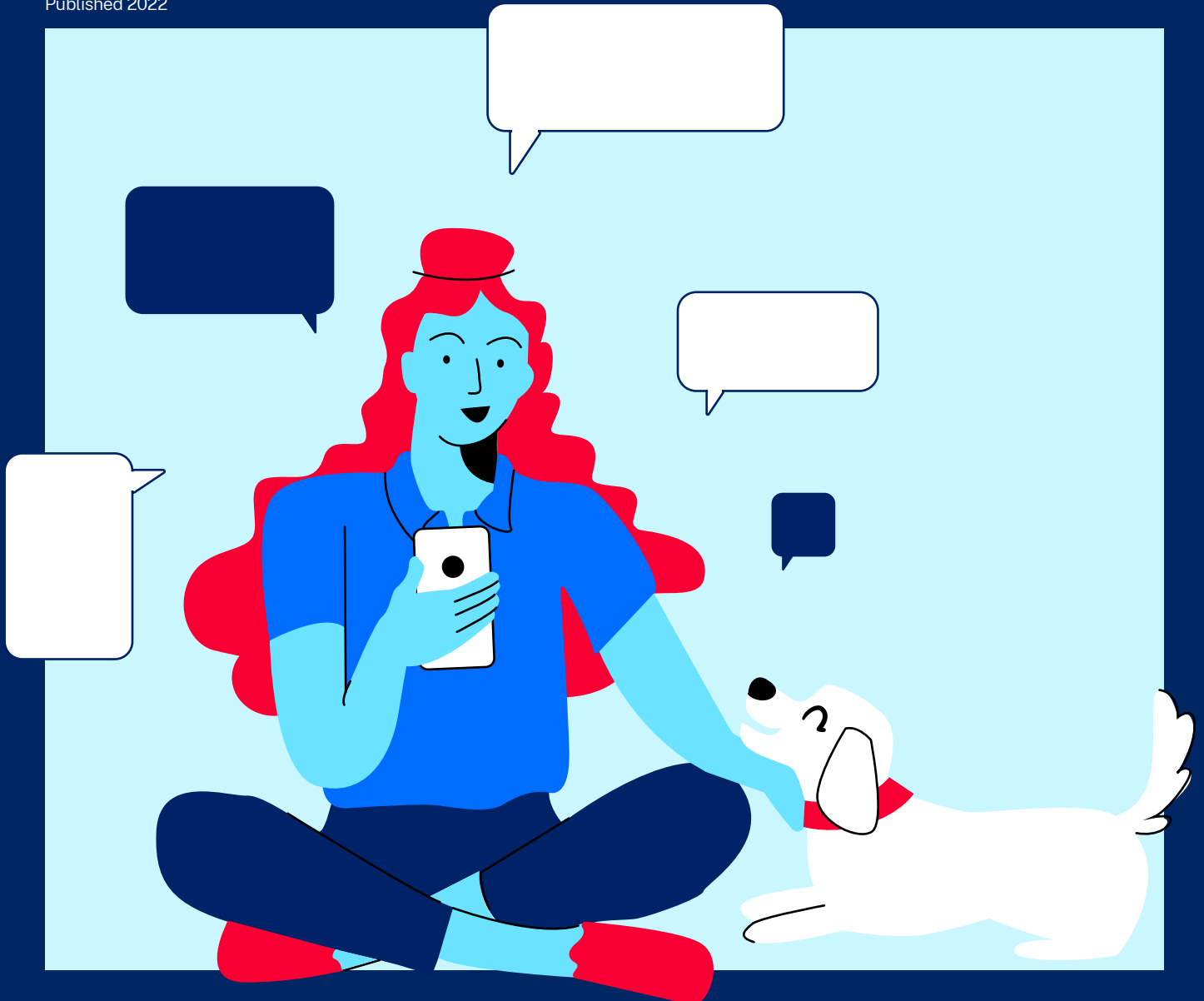


Reducing sludge in text messages

Published 2022





Behavioural Insights in Action

Reducing sludge in text messages

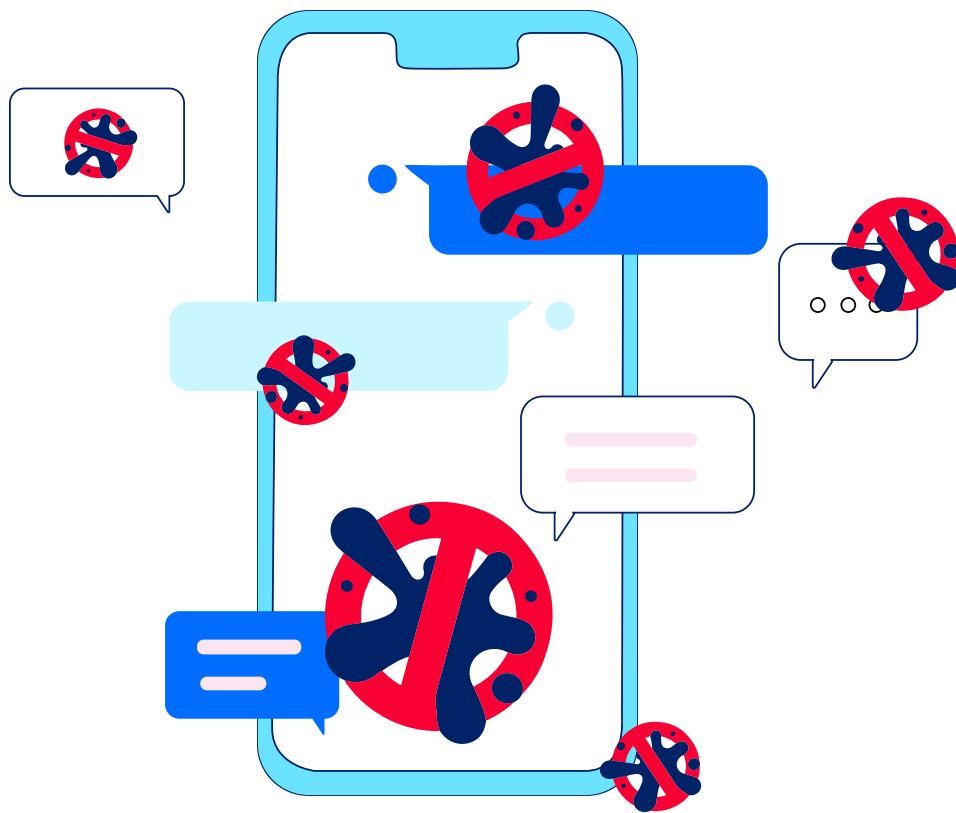
Published 2022

This guide was created by the NSW Behavioural Insights Unit, with assistance from the Behavioural Insights Team, the Reading Writing Hotline and NSW Government partners.

If you have comments, questions, or feedback on the guides get in touch with us at sludge@customerservice.nsw.gov.au

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Reducing sludge in text messages

Text messages are a uniquely immediate channel for interaction with our customers. Where emails and letters require effort to open and read, and websites rely on our customers seeking them out, text messages are direct, compelling, and accessible.

Government text messages can help our customers by reminding them of appointments, helping them make bookings or applications, and keeping them informed with instant updates. However, unclear, poorly formatted and confusing text messages can be challenging for our customers and damage our credibility.

We should take the time to think about our customers' needs, and design sludge-free messages that are clear, simple, and credible.

Where to begin

There are three key elements to think about when identifying and reducing sludge in text messages.



1. Purpose and call-to-action

- Does the text message have a clear purpose?
- Have you clearly identified the sender?
- Is the call-to-action clear?
- Are there any privacy concerns? (sharing phones, court dates)



2. Language and content

- Is the text message clear, concise and to the point?
- Is the text message personalised to the customer?
- Have you used the message framing that is most likely to encourage action?
- Have you highlighted how many similar customers have completed the desired action?



3. Next steps

- Is the message communicated when the customer is able to take action?
- Is the desired behaviour the default or easiest option?
- Have you made it as easy as possible for customers to enroll, confirm or take the desired action?
- Have you made it clear if customers can respond to the text message, and if so, how they should do so?

Reducing sludge in text messages

Quick reference guide



1. Purpose and call-to-action

- ✓ **Is the purpose for receiving the text message clear to your customer?**

Explain clearly in the text why the customer is receiving it (e.g., 'your appointment with X')

- Test your messages with user to assess clarity

- ✓ **Is there a clear call-to-action?**

Make the call-to-action clear and prominent (e.g. 'book your appointment on our website now')

- Clearly state when and where action needs to be taken + consequences
- If you have multiple calls to action use a numbered list to help customers prioritise and follow through on each of them

- ✓ **Does the text message clearly identify the sender?**

Make it clear who the text message is coming from

- Ensure your text message is delivered by a contact with a name, not an unknown number
- Make sure all messages are sent from the same number, so your text messages appear less like spam and are easier to keep track of
- Sign off your text message with an appropriate messenger



2. Language and content



Is the text message clear, concise and to the point?

Use simple and short messages

- Reduce text length but maintain clarity; strive to ensure personality and tone are not lost at the expense of brevity. Simple everyday language



Is the text message personalised to the customer?

Use personalisation to make messages more salient

- Addressing the recipient by name (also personally relevant details, i.e. your postcode)



Have you used other behavioural insights techniques to encourage action?

Use the message framing that is most likely to encourage action

- Use framing that is most likely to encourage action

Use social norms to encourage action

- Use descriptive social norms to highlight a majority of people have completed the desired action, if this is the case



3. Next steps



Is the message communicated when action is likely to be taken?

Timing of the text message

- Send SMS reminders when the customer is most likely to be able to take action immediately
- Keep people informed as to where they are in a process-how many steps they have left



Is the desired behaviour the easiest option?

Use defaults

- Make the desired behaviour the default option
- e.g., Making a service opt-out, rather than opt-in

Reduce frictions

- Link directly to the webpage where an action is required

Consider interactive elements

- Allow customers to reply/ confirm or reject enrollment to your message

When should I use text messages?

Text messages are powerful channel for direct interaction with customers. However, some contexts and processes are more appropriate for text messages than others.



Use text messages when...

- Recipients need to be reminded to do something.
- Information is short and sharp.
- People need to be given the information at a certain date and time.
- Recipients are from a highly mobile population that move frequently.
- Trying to reach a diverse population.
- Customers need to be prompted to make decisions, reminded of commitments, or updated on developments over a long period of time.
- When one simple action is needed, such as making an appointment.



Don't use text messages when...

- Information is confidential or sensitive.
- Legal information must be provided.
- Trying to convince someone of something controversial.
- Information contained in the message should be authoritative, such as first correspondence of a fine or criminal offence.
- There may be less mobile phone usage or access
- There may be an issue (or perceived issue) of an intrusion on privacy.
- The quality or reliability of phone numbers is poor.



1. Purpose and call-to-action

In this section

[Make the purpose of the message clear](#)

[Have a clear call-to-action](#)

[Make it clear who the message is coming from](#)

Make the purpose of the message clear

Example



Reminder!

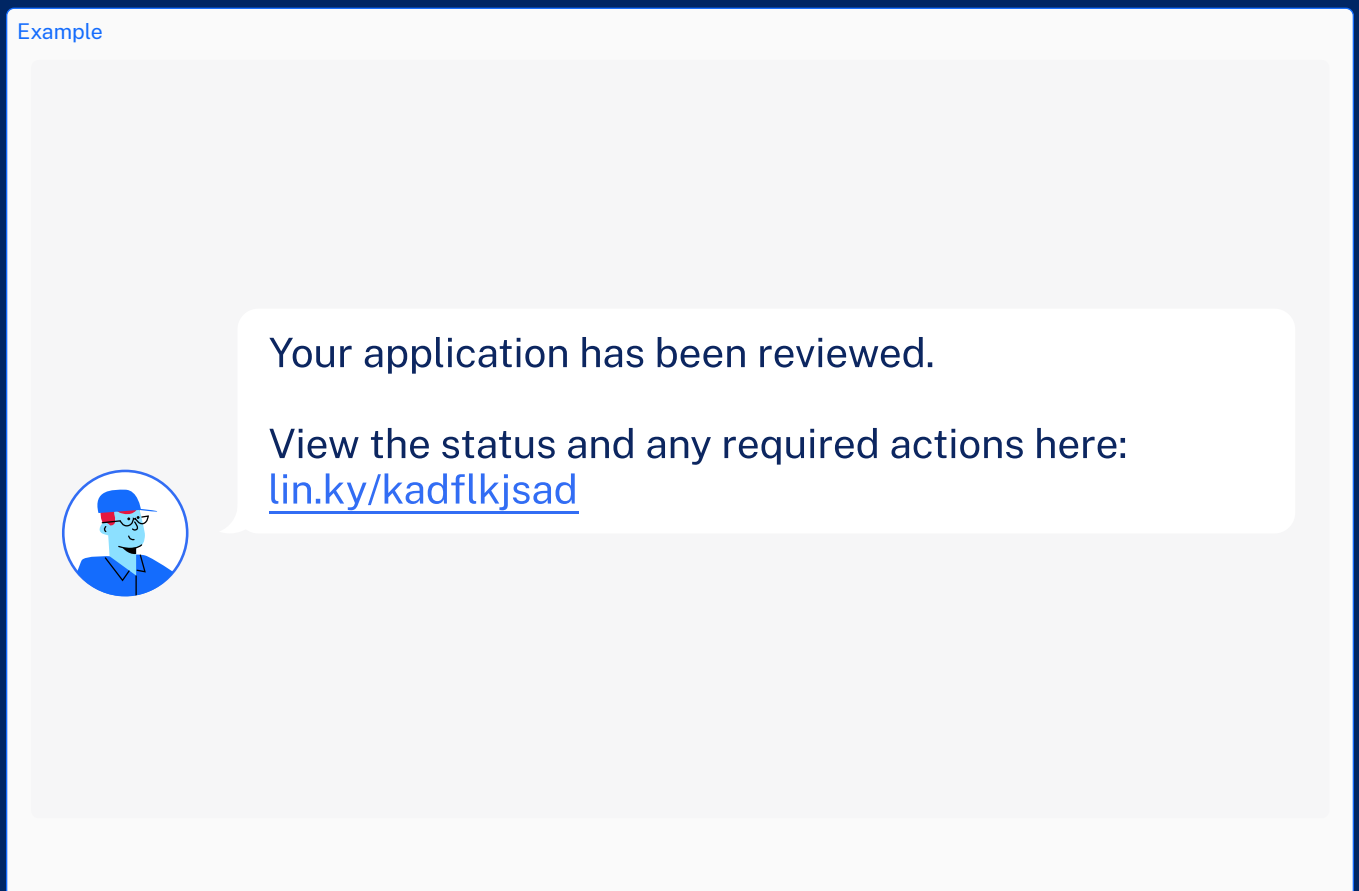
You have an appointment with The Department at 11am on Wednesday 1 June.

To confirm your attendance, respond Y.
To reschedule or cancel, respond N.

Customers should be able to quickly and easily interpret the purpose of the text message – who it's from, what it's about, and what they are being asked to do. Use focused, easy to understand and direct language.

For example, a message about an appointment should tell you who the appointment is with, when it is, and whether you must do anything about it. Think about parcel notifications – when you get a text from the post office you want to know who the parcel is coming from, when to expect it, and what they'll do if you're not home.

Have a clear call-to-action



All text messages should include a clear call-to-action – a direction about what the customer should do after receiving the message. Calls to action give customers a clear understanding of what to do to achieve a desired outcome.

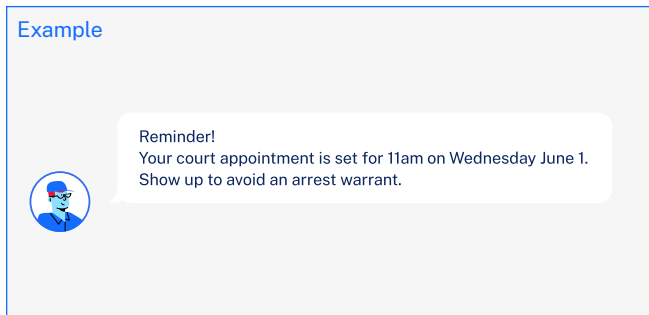
In general, a call-to-action will link a specific purpose to an action (e.g., “To get assistance with X, call...”). Make sure you spell out whether the customer needs to interact with the SMS at all (whether opening a link or replying directly) – if they don’t need to reply to the SMS, make that clear in the text.



1. Purpose and call-to-action

How do I do this?

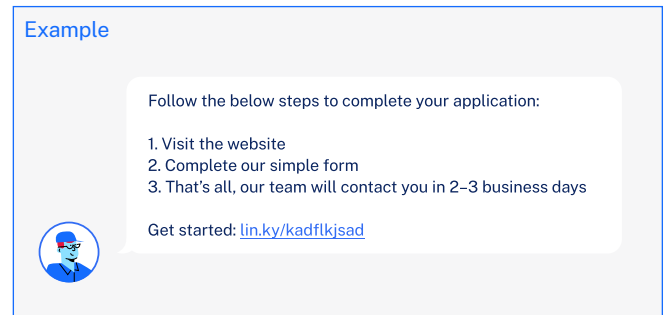
Clearly stating when and where action needs to be taken, and the consequences of not taking action.



One study tested different text messages to increase court appointment attendance. Some messages were simple reminder messages with information about the date and time of the court appointment, while others included the penalty for failing to appear (“Show up to avoid an arrest warrant”).

The simple reminder to attend court reduced non-attendance by 21 per cent, however the reminder messages were most effective when they included the penalty for failing to appear.¹

If there are multiple calls to action, make them salient by using a numbered bullet list.



Calls to action must be clear to the customer. This can be difficult if your message is asking them to do multiple things – customers can find it harder to remember what they all are and may have trouble prioritising them.

You can help your customers by using a numbered list, ideally in order of priority. By saying 1. Do this, 2. Do that and so on you make salient what they need to do and provide an order of action which helps them prioritise what to do first.

You may find that you have multiple, complex calls to action which are difficult to incorporate into one text message. If you are facing this challenge you should consider whether text message is the best channel for your customers (versus email or correspondence).

Make it clear who the text message is coming from

Example

Hello Steven,

This is Barry from The Department.

I am writing to let you know that we have received your application and it has been reviewed.

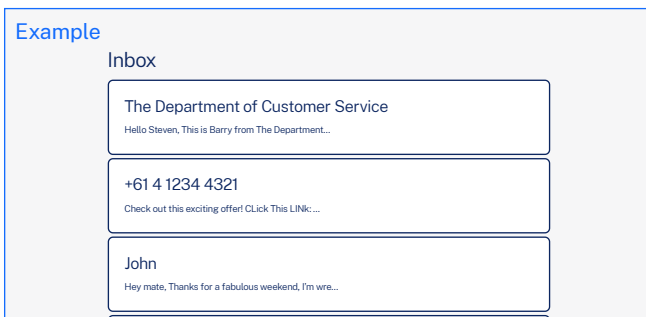
View the status and any required actions here:
lin.ky/kadflkjsad



The person who sends the text message, or “the messenger,” will impact how the message is received by customers. In behavioural science, the “messenger effect” refers to the tendency that people have to give different weight to information, depending on who they are hearing it from. Clarifying who the text message is coming from is important because customers are likely to distrust SMS messages from unknown sources.

How do I do this?

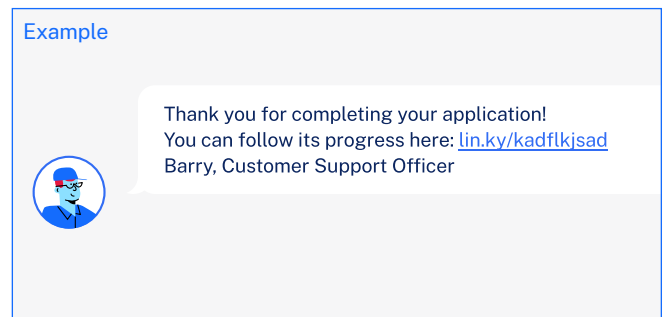
Ensure your text message is delivered by a contact with a name, not an unknown number.



Many text messaging delivery systems/platforms offer a range of options to allow senders to select a number and sender ID associated with each message. Using a sender ID means that recipients see the name of your organisation, as opposed to just a phone number.

You can increase the credibility of your messages by ensuring that all text messages customers get come from the same phone number. This makes the messages look more credible as well as keeping them in the same place on your customer's phone.

Sign off your text message with an appropriate messenger.



Researchers have found that people are more receptive to messengers representing sources who are demographically similar to them or people they perceive as experts². For customers, effective messengers could include individual agency staff, or the agency director.

You may consider creating a pseudonym for your staff messenger based on a real job role, for instance “from May -Customer Support Officer.” However make sure it's clear who the messenger is. For example, a recent Australian trial used SMS messages signed by a public servant persona called “Bruce”. Qualitative interviews conducted after the trial showed that some people didn't recognise that the SMS was from a government department or official, with some believing it was a scam or less trustworthy.³



2. Language and content

In this section

[Use simple and short messages](#)

[Use personalisation to make messages more attention grabbing](#)

[Use the message framing that is most likely to encourage action](#)

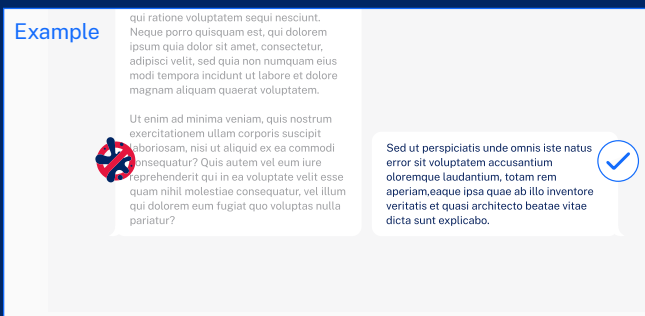
Use simple and short messages

Text messages are an instantaneous form of communication and can easily be forgotten seconds after a user receives one. Make sure the action customers should take after receiving the message is obvious and unmistakable.

Eliminating irrelevant information, providing clear language and using a direct tone can increase the likelihood that customers take action after receiving the text message.⁴

How do I do this?

Keep text messages brief, with only essential information, while not sacrificing clarity or personality.



The image shows a comparison of two text messages. The left message is long and complex, starting with 'qui ratione voluptatem sequi nesciunt.' and ending with 'pariatur?'. It is marked with a red 'X' icon. The right message is short and clear, starting with 'Sed ut perspiciatis unde omnis iste netus error sit voluptatem accusantium' and ending with 'dicta sunt explicabo.' It is marked with a blue checkmark icon.

Example

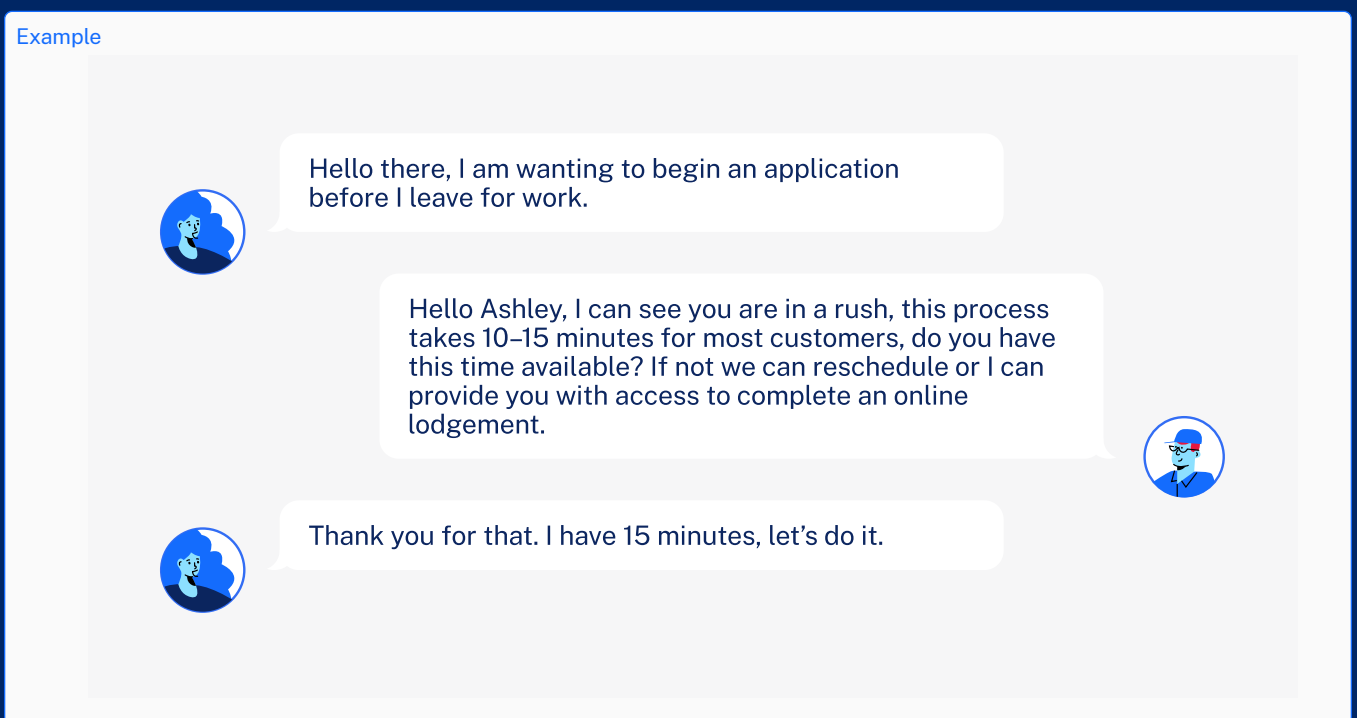
qui ratione voluptatem sequi nesciunt. Neque porro quisquam est, qui dolorem ipsum quia dolor sit amet, consectetur, adipisci velit, sed quia non numquam eius modi tempora incidunt ut labore et dolore magnam aliquam quaerat voluptatem.

Ut enim ad minima veniam, quis nostrum exercitationem ullam corporis suscipit laboriosam, nisi ut aliquid ex ea commodi consequatur? Quis autem vel eum iure reprehenderit qui in ea voluptate velit esse quam nihil molestiae consequatur, vel illum qui dolorem eum fugiat quo voluptas nulla pariatur?

Sed ut perspiciatis unde omnis iste netus error sit voluptatem accusantium oloremque laudantium, totam rem aperiam, eaque ipsa quae ab illo inventore veritatis et quasi architecto beatae vitae dicta sunt explicabo.

A systematic review of the effect of health messages on vaccination uptake (including SMS) found that shorter messages increased intention to vaccinate. Clear and credible messages in a language that the recipient (or target group) can understand were also associated with higher acceptability.⁵

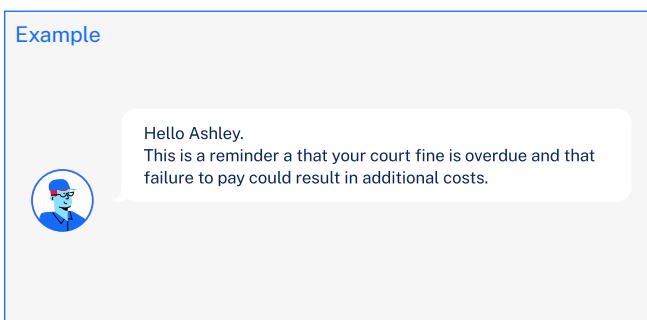
Use personalisation to make messages more attention grabbing



People respond better to stimuli that feels relevant and specific to them, this is known as 'personalisation'. There is a balance in personalisation. You want to ensure that you craft text messages that are personalised, while refraining from using information that people are likely to view as too personal.

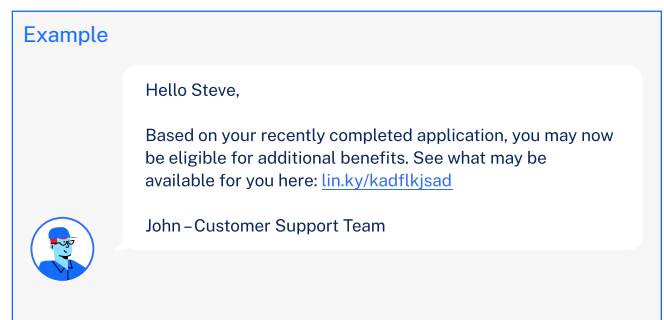
How do I do this?

Addressing the customer by their name.



In a UK trial, adding a person's name to a text message for collecting overdue court fines increased the number of recipients making a payment by almost 10 percentage points over a similar standard text message with no personalization, and by 27.8 percentage points over controls who received no text message.⁶

Tailoring message content based on customer data.



Consider ways to tailor text message content based on customer data, such as previous compliance patterns or work history. For example, “based on your recent activity X, your required action Y is now due.”

Sensitivity and personalisation

While personalisation is usually recommended, it's important to take your context into account. If your message is on a sensitive topic or a topic with privacy risks (like a court date), then you may want to consider using less identifiable information in the text.

Use of personalisation/sensitive details may also depend on who your customers are and their circumstances (e.g., if you know they are likely to share phones with their children).

Use the message framing that is most likely to encourage action

Example



Gain

You will save an average of 10 minutes if you lodge your application online.



Loss

You will spend an average of 2 more hours if you lodge your application in person.

Information can be framed in different ways to encourage people to take action.

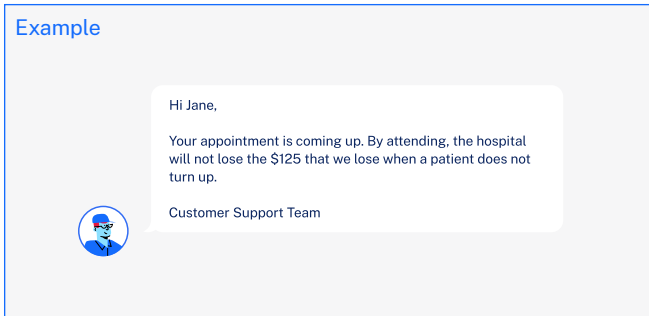
For example, you can use ‘gain framing’ – highlighting the positives that can come out of the call-to-action (like applying for a voucher or grant). You can also use ‘loss framing’ – highlighting the consequences of not responding to the call-to-action (like missing out on an opportunity or paying a late fee). Additional frames include appealing to your customers generosity, asking them for assistance, and more.

There is no one best frame for all situations. You should choose a message frame that is informed by data or insights on what is most likely to persuade customers to take the relevant action.

Ideally, different messages should be user-tested or trialled before implementing or scaling text message.

How do I do this?

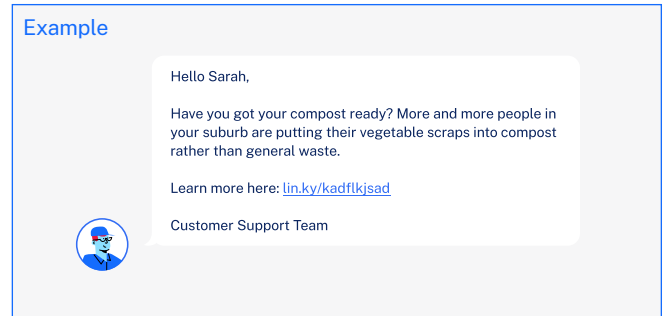
Framing and presenting information that highlights the benefits of the action, or the consequences of inaction.



This strategy can strongly influence the decisions customers make. In 2015, the NSW Behavioural Insights Unit conducted a trial at St Vincent’s Hospital, testing different SMS messages to try and increase hospital appointment attendance rates.⁷

The best performing message drew attention to how missed appointments financially impact the hospital: “By attending, the hospital will not lose the \$125 that we lose when a patient does not turn up.” St Vincent’s Hospital estimates they have saved \$200,000 per annum since implementing these messages.

Highlighting that others are performing the desired behaviour.



People are social: we like to do what others are doing and to behave in ways that conform to others’ expectations.⁸ When you want your customers to adopt a behaviour that most people are already doing, tell them in the text message how many customers are already doing the right thing. See our guide on reducing sludge in email correspondence for more details on how to effectively use social norms strategies in communications.

The diagram shows a hand holding a smartphone. The screen displays four lines of text, each with a blue arrow pointing to a label on the right:

- Text: "Hi Mel, I'm Derek, your Regional Manager at Training Services NSW." Label: "Personalisation"
- Text: "We are the regulatory body supporting your apprenticeship. We can help with what's happening at work or with your training provider." Label: "Branding"
- Text: "At work, you can expect to learn new skills & receive mentorship." Label: "Behavioural principle (self-efficacy)"
- Text: "Find additional support on our website bit.ly/TSNSWsupport, or call me on 02 9242 1700." Label: "Call to action"

This is an example text message from a trial the NSW Behavioural Insights Unit ran with Training Services NSW and the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation to help learners get timely support to complete their apprenticeships and traineeships.⁹

You can see how the text message uses personalisation, a branding element to reinforce credibility, a behavioural principle supporting the recipient to see themselves a 'doer' and a clear call-to-action.



3. Next steps

In this section

[Consider the timing of the text message](#)

[Make the desired option the easiest option](#)

[Reduce frictions](#)

Consider the timing of the text message



Send text messages when your customers are most likely to read them, respond to them, and take action. This will reduce the likelihood that they feel overwhelmed by or become desensitized to the messages.

How do I do this?

Send SMS reminders when they are most likely to affect customers.

Text messages should be sent at times that consider customers' daily routines and when they would most likely complete the action in the message prompts.

While ideal times will vary depending on your customers, some good rules of thumb to follow are:

- Send messages at the beginning of the working day when people are less distracted.
- Vary the timing of messages from week to week. Anecdotally, researchers at the UK Behavioural Insights Team have found that changing the time when batch messages are sent and not sending them perfectly on the hour/half hour (i.e., 9:08 AM rather than 9:00 AM) reduces the repetition or predictability of messages and helps customers remember them.

You should avoid times that might trigger negative customer responses. A trial in the UK found that early early-morning or weekend SMS messages were poorly received by recipients, and in some cases triggered abusive replies.¹⁰

Let customers know they are advancing in the process or moving towards their goal.

People are more motivated to complete a task when they can see the finish is in sight, this is called the 'goal gradient effect'.¹¹

You can use this by sending text messages to customers telling them when they are moving forward in a process. For example, "We've just received your [document/milestone], meaning you're only two steps away from securing your first benefit payment."

A UK trial found the goal gradient effective in increasing patient engagement. Patients who got messages providing regular updates from services, and reassurance that the service was working increased appointment attendance compared to patients who did not receive any text messages.¹²

Tailor the timing of your messages to the goal you hope to achieve.

Example

Text Message
Wednesday 12:30 pm

Hello Steven,

This is a friendly reminder for your medicals appointment tomorrow at 2:30pm at the BUPA medicals, Melbourne



Although there is no scientific consensus on the optimal frequency for text messages,¹³ user research conducted during previous text message campaigns suggests the following best practices:

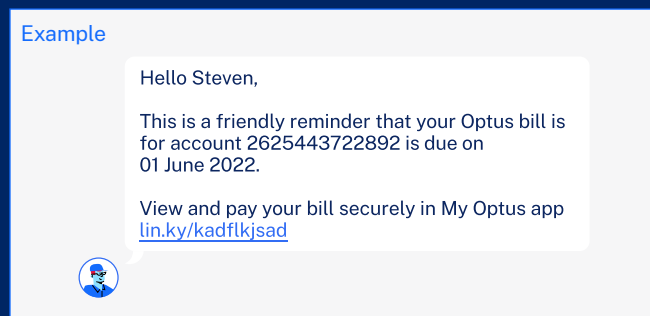
- For reminder messages for an event or task such as attending an appointment, messages should be sent once or twice leading up to the event. For instance, one week and one day before at most.
- For ongoing reminders or prompts such as reminding customers to complete a form: one to two messages per week.
- For general information-sharing messages should be sent approximately every two weeks and no more than once per week.

Make the desired behaviour the easiest option

Humans will often choose the path of least resistance. This is known in the behavioural sciences as the ‘status quo bias’.¹⁴ If choosing the desired behaviour is in the best interest of the customer consider making it the easiest option to select.

How do I do this?

Use defaults by making a service opt-out.

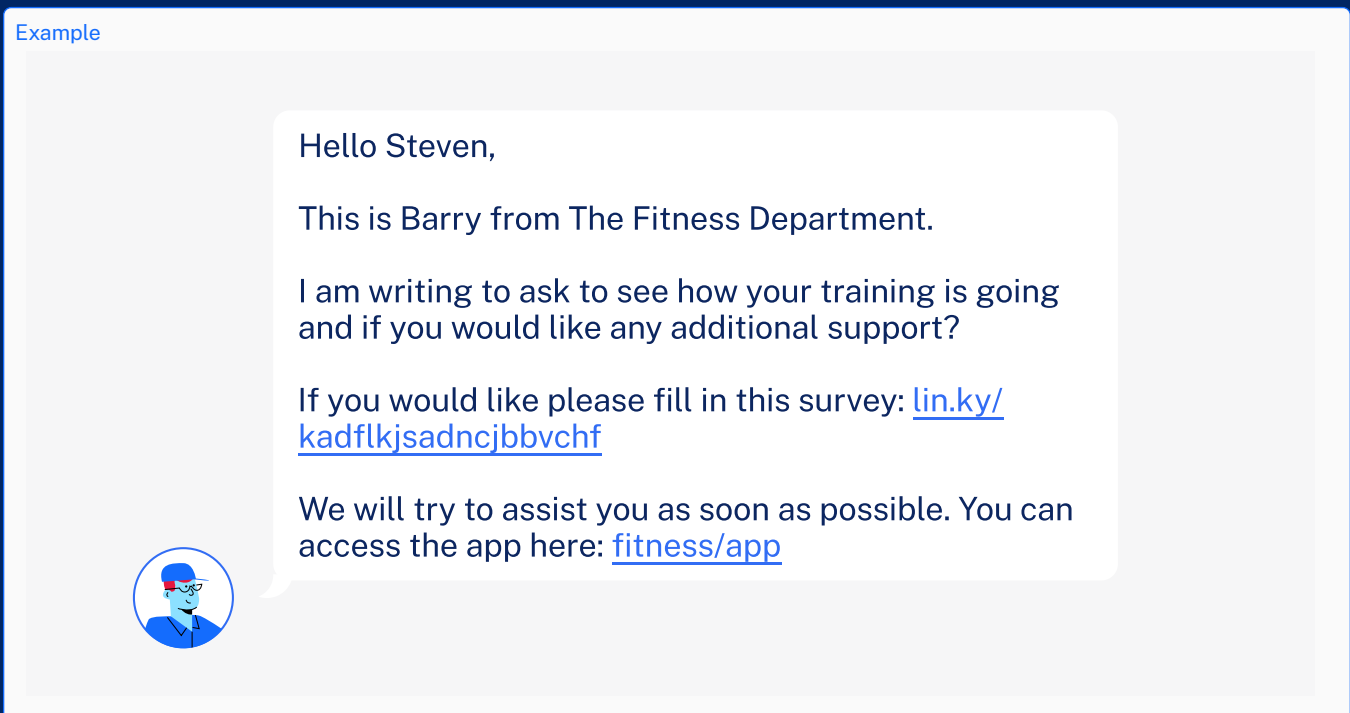


We have a strong tendency to go with the default or pre-set option, since it is easy to do so. If the recipient of your text message needs to make an active decision, consider making the desired outcome the default option.

One way to do this is to make a service opt-out, rather than opt-in. Researchers compared student take up of an education intervention offered to parents in 3 different SMS messages. Offering parents to opt their child out of the program increased take-up by 95 percentage points (compared to opt-in enrolment) and improved student achievement as measured by GPA and course passing.¹⁵

Reduce frictions

Example




Hello Steven,

This is Barry from The Fitness Department.

I am writing to ask to see how your training is going and if you would like any additional support?

If you would like please fill in this survey: lin.ky/kadflkjsadncjbbvchf

We will try to assist you as soon as possible. You can access the app here: fitness/app

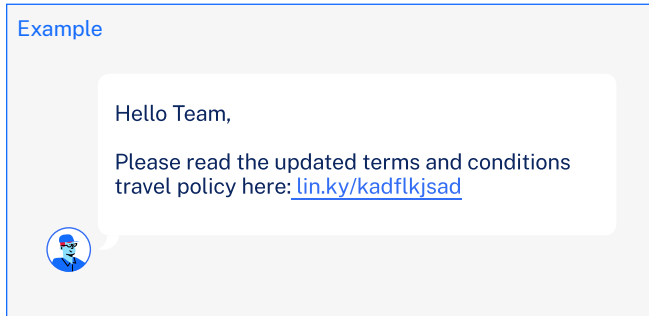


Friction costs are small, seemingly minor details that make a task more effortful and have a disproportionately large effect on whether people complete a task.

For example, you might be told to complete a form but then have to look the form up on your own. Or you might be provided a link to a website which hosts the form, but then search through various pages to find the right form.

How do I do this?

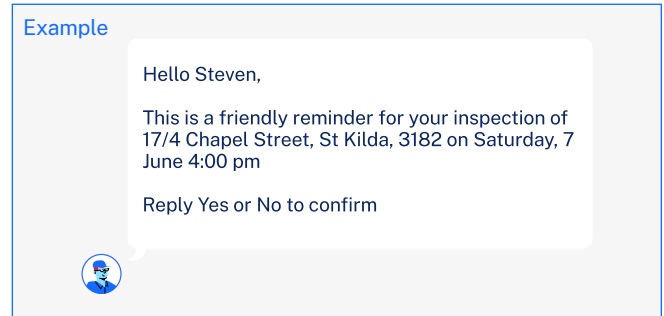
Linking directly to more information or next steps.



You can reduce the length of your text message by directing customers to additional information or required actions via links to outside resources.

Make sure that links take customers directly to the relevant webpage or form they need to complete. In one trial, communications that directed recipients to the specific form they were required to complete, as opposed to the web page that included a link to the form, increased form completion rates from 19% to 23%.¹⁶

Allow customers to respond directly.



Make it easier for customers to confirm their attendance or enrolment in a service by allowing them to respond directly to the text message.

In the study described above under defaults, a text message which allowed parents to enrol their child in an education program by replying directly to the message text message made parents 11 times more likely to sign-up, compared to a message which provided parents instruction on how to enrol online.¹⁷

Note that if customers cannot respond you should make this clear in the text (e.g., “please do not reply to this message, if you have any questions call us on [number]”). Customers should know where they can get more information and ask questions.

How to test whether changes to your text messages work

What works is not always consistent or certain. Even when we use evidence-based behavioural insights, we cannot always be sure what will work and what will not in a particular context. Testing proposed changes to your text messages is a critical step because it:

- Enables you to be confident that your changes yield the desired benefits
- Helps you minimise unintended consequences
- Helps you maximise cost-benefit because you will only implement and scale the changes that are proven to work

One of the most useful testing methods you can use for text messages, is A/B testing, this involves sending half of your users one version of a text message, and the other half a different version.

The allocation of which text message ('A' or 'B') is sent to each user is done randomly, so you can get a good idea of which version performs better. If your text message sending process allows for randomisation in this way, then you can perform an A/B test.

To learn more about A/B testing and find out how to do it, [read our guide to testing here](#).

Endnotes

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- 15 Bergman, P., Lasky-Fink, J., & Rogers, T. (2020). Simplification and defaults affect adoption and impact of technology, but decision makers do not realize it. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 158, 66-79.
- 16 Behavioural Insights Team. (2014). *EAST: Four simple ways to apply behavioural insights*.
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We want to hear from you!

If you have comments, questions, or feedback
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