A recent TechTip published on ICT Update (issue 55) provides interesting guidelines on how to send out short messages to a large number of preselected recipients using SMS texting.

The members of agricultural cooperatives often live far from the organisation's main offices. It can, therefore, be difficult for farmers to find out about urgent meetings, training courses, market prices and other new developments. To help keep their members up-to-date, cooperatives can use software or web-based applications to send text messages to all or selected members' cell phones at the same time. One popular service for sending multiple messages is BulkSMS. You can register to use it directly from the website or download a desktop version of the application.

Website

From www.bulkSMS.com , click on 'international' under the section 'select your regional site here'. (Other options include: UK, South Africa, España, USA and Deutschland.) On the next page, click 'register'. You will then be asked to complete a form including username, password, name, address, email address and cell phone number. Tick the box to agree with the service's terms and conditions, and click 'register'.

You will then receive an activation code, sent to your cell phone and by e-mail. This currently entitles you to five free credits with the site. Click the 'message centre' link, and then 'claim free credits' to enter the code.

Add numbers

Next, add the names and cell phone numbers of the people you want to send messages to. Click 'phone book groups' and type in a group name. You can set up several groups. For example, one might include all members and another only executive committee members. Type in the group's name and click 'add'. To add data from an existing file, choose 'upload'. You can upload names and phone numbers from an Excel file, but first open the relevant file, click 'save as…' and save the document as 'Text (Tab delimited)'. In order to suit the format of the site, save the data in three columns: first names, surnames and cell phone numbers. If the numbers are for phones in different countries, you will have to add the countries' dialling codes at this point. Click 'browse' on the web page to locate the data file, then 'next'. You will see the list of

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uploaded names and numbers. At the top of the column with names, select either 'first name' or 'surname' from the drop-down menu, then 'cellular number' from the menu above the phone numbers. Set the country code in the field at the bottom of the page if the numbers are for phones in the same country, then click 'next' to save.

Send

To start sending messages, click 'my account'. From there you can go straight to 'send messages to a group' (you may first have to buy more credits, however, which can also be done from this page). Type the message you want to send. You can also choose to have the recipient's first name or surname added automatically. Tick the box 'repliable' if you want the recipient to be able to reply. Tick 'use tagline discount' to add the text 'via BulkSMS.com' to each message and get a 10% discount. You can also choose 'send as unicode' if the language of the text contains characters which are not usual in Latin script. To send, choose the group you want to send the message to, then click 'send now'. You can also select 'confirm cost' first to get an idea of how much it will cost to send the message to everyone in the group.

Desktop

The desktop application is useful for organisations with a limited internet connection. You can prepare the messages and group data first, then only send when online.

Install

From the BulkSMS homepage, select 'international' from the regional options (see above), then click the link 'desktop to SMS'. Click 'download BulkSMS text messenger now' to download the application to your computer. Double click the downloaded file, and then 'run' to install. Select 'new user' in the pop-up window that appears when you first run the program, and follow the registration process as outlined above (note: the computer should be online for this).

Add contacts

With this version, you can upload member details directly from an Excel or text document, or import address book details from Microsoft Outlook or Windows Address Book. Click 'groups' in the left-hand window, then 'import contacts' on the toolbar; the data will then be added to your contacts list.

Send

Click 'messenger home' and select 'send an SMS text message'. In the pop-up window that

follows, choose the group you want to send the message to, then type the message. Click 'send' or, if you want to send the message later, click 'schedule' then choose a time and date.

Related resources

FrontlineSMS : This bulk messaging system is supplied free to non-profit organisations.

See also the ICT Update feature on FrontlineSMS , first published in February 2009.
Clickatell : This company, based in South Africa, provides a service similar to BulkSMS.

Author: Jim Dempsey

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First published on ICT Update with the title " Send updates via SMS "