

2 trillion new messages

While young people still send the most texts, adults and businesses are catching on

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PEORIA - Do U txt?

If you don't, chances are you remember phone booths and black-and-white television.

In the digital age, where more than 230 million Americans have cellular telephones - up from 4 million in 1990, according to the Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association - an increasing number of those cell phone users now communicate without talking.

Text messaging - where a message is tapped out using letters on the keypad, often using a new vocabulary (A3: "anytime, anywhere, anyplace" or the now-familiar LOL: "laughing out loud") - is no laughing matter for phone companies.

Mobile messaging revenue is expected to top \$60 billion in 2008, according to Gartner Inc., a research firm based in Stamford, Conn. The company forecasts 2 trillion messages will be sent via text messages worldwide this year.



The biggest users are in Asian markets, but texting is picking up in North America. Customers of Verizon Wireless, the nation's second-largest telephone company with the largest wireless market, sent or received nearly 36.5 billion text messages during the third quarter of 2007. That's well above the 14.5 billion text messages made during the same period the previous year, said Verizon spokeswoman Carolyn Schamberger.



Text messages have become increasingly important to phone company revenues. In the third quarter last year, \$2 billion or 20 percent of all Verizon service revenues came from data services, the category that includes text messaging, said Schamberger. In 2006, data services made up 14 percent of the company's service revenue stream, she said.



AT&T saw text messages double on its system in a year, from 12 billion in 2006 to 24 billion last year, said spokeswoman Meghan Roskopf. One factor driving the trend is that most new cell phone handsets include keyboards, she said.



"Texting has now hit Peoria hard and heavy," said Jason Bastien, senior vice president at Bastien Wireless, a central Illinois cell phone dealer that handles all the major carriers.



"Kids nowadays would rather text message than use talk time minutes," he said.



While the young dominate the texting market - nearly 70 percent of 18- to 39-year-old U.S. cell phone users text message daily, according to eMarketer - the text trend is spreading.



"Businesses are now using text messaging. Our company uses text to get messages to employees across our six area stores," said Bastien.

Texters have more options than ever these days. Now you can text-order a pizza or text in your vote for a favorite act on "American Idol."

For some, texting is another tool made possible by changing technology. "While some may argue text messaging interferes with work, it can also help. It's the quickest and easiest way to reach sources for news stories who may be stuck in a meeting or on the House or Senate floor," said Journal Star political reporter Karen McDonald.

Businesses have had to come to grips with this technology, said Mary Pille, executive director of the Employers Association in Peoria. "We've had a lot of organizations call to upgrade their cell phone policies. It's not just young people that are texting anymore," she said.

While text messaging isn't just a habit of the young, Pille discovered young people do a lot of it. "When we got a recent phone bill, we found out that our daughter, who's at college, made 1,100 text messages in one month," she said.

Text messaging may have replaced letter writing among the young, according to a recent British study of 1,000 teenagers and young adults.

But the cost of texting can be a lot more than a postage stamp. Without a package that allows for extensive or unlimited use, uncontrolled texting can lead to some huge telephone bills, said Bastien, adding that some customers have brought in monthly bills that swelled to \$200 to \$300 because of heavy text messaging use. "We make it a point to inform people about the costs involved when we sell them a phone," he said.

Packages now allow for extended use. U.S. Cellular, for example, offers a family plan for \$20 a month - unlimited texting for up to five people.

"We still have a low number of text packages sold in Peoria. People don't want to spend the money until they see how much text messaging is used," Bastien said.

Those "Omgod" phone bills have come to the attention of the Citizens Utility Board, the Illinois consumer watchdog group. "It used to be that it was dial-up Internet use that triggered unusually high bills. Now it's almost always text messaging or data use that's responsible," said CUB executive director David Kolata, who urged area residents to bring their phone bills - land or cellular - to CUB's phone clinic at the Peoria Public Library in Downtown Peoria from 3 to 7 p.m. next Monday.

As the popularity of texting has increased, so has the cost. While AT&T charges 15 cents per message, Sprint increased the cost of an individual message to 20 cents last year. Verizon plans to raise the individual message cost from 15 cents to 20 cents in March.

Package costs for data services such as texting vary. At AT&T, for example, prices range from \$5 a month for 200 messages to \$20 a month for unlimited messaging for an individual user.

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