



20th Anniversary of SMS

Interview with Neil Papworth

To celebrate the 20th anniversary of what we consider the most popular App ever invented – the SMS – the clickSUMO team has decided to interview the man, who 20 years ago, changed entirely the way billions of people now communicate.

Philippe Joly, Co-founder of clickSUMO (www.clickSUMO.com), global SMS provider, interviews Neil Papworth, the man who sent the world's very first SMS on December 3rd 1992.

Philippe Joly: Hi Neil, and thanks for taking the time to answer a few questions. 20 years ago, you sent the world's first SMS. It said "Merry Christmas". Can you tell us about that day?

Neil Papworth: Just like many days at that time, I went down to one of the Vodafone sites in Newbury, and was in one of the switching rooms sitting at a computer. There was someone in the room who was in contact with someone down at the Vodafone Christmas party. When it was time to send the message, I was told "now !" and typed the message on the computer and sent it. A short while later I had confirmation that it had worked.

PJ: SMS was originally meant to be used between technicians to communicate and run tests. At the beginning, were there any plans to offer this useful feature to mobile subscribers as well?

NP: I believe that it was also meant to be used by "executive assistants" to send messages to their bosses etc. But I don't think it was thought of to become so widespread as it is today.



PJ: SMS has without doubt been welcomed with great enthusiasm and has become an incredible phenomenon, used by several billions of mobile users. SMS generated revenues in trillions of USD and last year alone, over 7 trillion SMS were sent by people of all age, background, skillset, language and cultures. In your opinion, what has made such a simple feature on the mobile phone become so popular?

NP: I think it's simply because it's so available. Every mobile phone can do text messaging. There are no special clients, or tools needed. Today, people have instant messaging, but one person uses Skype, another Google Chat, another MSN Live Messenger etc., and the interconnects between all of these just aren't all there. Text messaging was on the phones almost right from the start. If you bought a GSM phone in 1995, it had SMS.

PJ: SMS has evolved over time. It rose to fame as a simple Person-to-Person short messaging used mainly by teenagers, and then reached a wider audience. In the late nineties, it became an enabler for other business opportunities such as mobile payment with Premium Rate SMS, Multimedia messaging with MMS, and Application-to-Person SMS used by organisations all over the world to interact with their customers to notify, remind, confirm and inform. Do you think that SMS has reached its limitations or are there some more ways to use SMS that have not yet been tapped into?

NP: Well it does what it does. It's a good push notification method, for example when used for MMS etc. I think SMS is here to stay for a while. It's used for M2M, and not everyone everywhere has data plans. I know people today with modern smartphones, and don't have data – just use WiFi. These people use SMS when they are out and about.



PJ: With the rise of Chat services, and tools using other communication channels such as Whatsapp, some people think that SMS will slowly fade out. Do you think that new services coming out on the market are a threat to SMS or can they live side-by-side?

NP: With the onset of 4G everywhere, I can imagine that operators must be looking to reduce the number of different systems they have to maintain. Once everyone is “always on” and on the data network, why use SMS ? Maybe because someone, somewhere still doesn’t have a data plan, or a smartphone. Everyone has their own preference for IM software – but what has EVERYONE got on their phone ? I can see SMS being around for a long while yet.

PJ: I personally love SMS for its simplicity. It has 160 characters, limited options and is really just there to allow fast and easy communication. People have felt restricted by the characters limitations at first, but soon they adapted and created their own texting language and shortcuts. This shows that users love this little tool and were even willing to adapt their way of communicating in order to use SMS. This alone, says a lot about how much people love using SMS. Are you up-to-date in the whole texting lingo or are you lost like most of our generation?

NP: I know a bit lol ! Working in the telecommunications business, there are so many acronyms for everything, that I barely notice them in amongst the other jargon. But, saying that, that doesn’t mean I don’t have to Google the odd one every now and then ;-)

PJ: Thanks a million!