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Healthy ring to IT

Mobile and healthcare brought together..

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Narayanan Ram

Narayanan Ram and Satish Babu met through common friends. But what was an experiment turned into an overwhelming business. Ram runs PurpleTeal, a company in the healthcare space that signs up mobile phone users to remind them about whatever they want to be nudged about. It could be medicines on time, or medical tests that are due, a doctor's visit, or even a programme to quit smoking.

When, Babu, who runs the UniverCell chain of mobile phone stores across South India, saw the proposal to distribute this service through his stores, he saw a sure winner in Narayanan and his offering.

So far, Purple Teal has crossed one million 'interventions' (or SMS messages to subscribers). About 1,000 subscribers are signing in daily for the LiveWell service at UniverCell's stores. The tie-up with UniverCell is about four months old now. The two share revenues, details of which are not yet public. Ask Babu what made him so confident about this offering and he says, "It's health and it's to do with mobile phones — a great combination for an Indian user."

His rationale is that health consciousness is at a high — be it signing up for gyms or going for morning walks or addressing obesity, not to mention the exponential growth that the mobile phone market has seen in India in the last few years. And, of course, SMS as a tool is hot in India. In fact, about 20 per cent of those signing up for the LiveWell service have opted for a "quit smoking" programme. This has encouraged Ram to bring out as a separate package for those interested in giving up the habit or to make a loved one kick the butt. Launched recently, it sends out messages that help smokers give up the habit gradually. Examples of such messages are: "It's lunch time, don't smoke. Try something chewy," and "Find another smoker who wants to quit. The Quit Buddy and you will together succeed".

It also sends out messages about the dangers of smoking, the benefits of quitting the habit, such as details about reduced risk of heart disease, decreasing levels of carbon monoxide in blood, and the like.

This is a six-month programme and towards the end, if it looks like the user might not meet his goal, an escalation SMS is sent to a loved one's mobile number as well.



Satish Babu

Babu says the Quit Smoking campaign from Purple Teal would be a rage among users. "It's such a 'giftable' item, given the New Year when everyone is making resolutions."

But won't the success of the offering be determined only through renewals that would happen six months after the start of the programme? He agrees it would but also cites the word-of-mouth recommendations that have resulted in further sales. "Often," says Ram, "a person accompanying the cell-phone buyer would opt for the LiveWell service and encourage the other to buy, as well." PurpleTeal currently has about 50,000 customers. According to Ram, "Only a fraction of that has come through UniverCell. However, nearly 55 per cent of the SMS traffic from us is to subscribers who came in through UniverCell." He explains that a subscriber base and the number of 'interventions' need not be linear. A younger target market, in the age group of 20-35, could opt for services with a higher frequency of reminders.

At Rs 100 for six months, the tariff for the LiveWell service is possibly an introductory offer. UniverCell's Babu feels that both he and Narayanan could benefit from a higher tariff. Says Babu, "We have to train our sales people, across hundreds of stores in our network, to give the same kind of experience to the buyer." Every subscriber takes at least 15 minutes to understand what the service means, to decide to buy it and then fill out the form opting in. "In a sense, time is money for us," explains Babu.

Towards phone services

Allying with companies such as Purple Teal is exactly what Satish Babu wants to do, given that he wants UniverCell to sell mobile phone services and not only phones. "Hopefully, we will soon reach a stage where we will 'also' sell mobile phones."

UniverCell also sells services such as insurance for mobile phones against theft.

It also sells software to mobile phone users to back up any data that their mobile phone has. So, if a user loses his phone, the software retrieves contact details and stored messages from a server to which regular updates had been sent, it locks the phone through a central software, it can delete the contact list from the phone and also create an alarm so that those in the vicinity know that the current phone user has stolen the phone. Babu says, "Protecting a contact list from the eyes of strangers is critical."

Sometimes, when mobile phones get stolen or even exchanged at dubious outlets, without deleting the contact list, anti-social elements could use the phone numbers of women to harass or send obscene messages to them.

UniverCell also plans to launch a software service by which even phones without GPRS facility can access their e-mails. Babu says, "GPRS phones cost a lot more than the basic ones. Now, even phones that come in the range of Rs 2,000 and Rs 3,000 can use our partner's software to send and download e-mails."

Once the user signs up for the service registering his user name and password for the e-mail service he wants to use, the back end server would automatically check for new mails and push them to the user's mobile in the form of a 140-character SMS. Any more text would have to be downloaded in the form of multiple SMSes. Users currently can't open attachments but, says Babu, "As a student or even a professional, you only need to be alerted to a new e-mail, so that you can act on it."

Currently, about 5 per cent of UniverCell's revenues comes from services such as LiveWell and similar software services. Babu wants that to rise to 15 per cent by the year 2010-11. "You will have to remember that the price value of handsets is also going up. So, it's a stiff target."

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