SMS and IVR to Improve Family Planning Services

Brief Overview

Uganda has one of the highest birth rates in Africa. More than four out of every ten women wish to access modern contraception to plan their family but are not able to. Family planning alone would reduce the country’s maternal mortality ratio by 33 percent. In order to make accurate information accessible and address the unmet need for family planning, Text to Change (TTC) has partnered with the Program for Accessible health Communication and Education (PACE) to implement a one year pilot program using a mobile platform.

TTC developed a flexible mobile phone platform that is able to use short message service (SMS), multimedia message service (MMS), interactive voice response (IVR), and data for spreading and collecting information. The pilot aims to tap into the enormous impact of mobile phones in Kampala, Uganda, and the combination of mass media campaign, project management, data collection, and monitoring and evaluation to enable PACE to get access to a larger group of people and increase real time interaction with its target populations. SMS and IVR are used to reach out to women, as well as check with service providers, to find out which women are using family planning.

The goals of the project are to send mobilization messages and to establish a large social network by using the power of SMS; facilitate data collection and reporting from community health workers; make it possible for users to ask simple questions to health care workers; give technical assistance to providers of technical services or community health care workers; and collect and analyze data.

The pilot began in July 2011 and has been extended to the end of 2012.

- **Geographic Coverage:** Kampala, Uganda
- **Implementation Partners:** Text to Change (TTC) is partnering with the Program for Accessible health Communication and Education (PACE).
- **Funder:** Program for Accessible health Communication and Education (PACE)
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About SMS and IVR to Improve Family Planning Services

Through the use of SMS and IVR, the project aims to:

• Provide general information on family planning and the two most popular long term methods, namely intrauterine device (IUD) and implants;
• Provide information on which clinics can provide the services for these family planning methods; and
• Send follow up messages to those that have received IUDs and implants to encourage and remind them about their next appointment dates with the clinic.

In addition to receiving messages, users are also able to text messages asking simple questions such as where to find services or what to do in case of any concerns. They receive feedback from PACE technical staff. Each group (apart from service providers) is subdivided by language (English, Luganda, Luo, Runyankole).

The mobile platform also facilitates data collection and reporting from community health workers via SMS. For example, they receive information including the number of implants and insertions made each month, and feedback on whether PACE is adequately supporting service providers in the mobilization of clients and the provision of services.

The project also enables closed user group discussions via SMS according to geographical areas to encourage those that are happy with the services of IUDs and implants to share their experiences and lessons learned. This type of dialogue can address the myths and fears held by some users. These groups are also linked to PACE’s social media platforms.

Evaluation and Results

Evaluation data is not yet available given the recent start date of the pilot. The first phase of the pilot project has been successfully implemented. IVR was initiated in February 2012, and text messages are being sent out to the women and service providers on a monthly basis. The project has been receiving regular reports from the service providers.

In addition, TTC trained PACE staff to manage the closed used group discussion platform, and PACE is currently working on creating the groups and inviting women to share their experiences of using family planning methods.

Lessons Learned

• Realizing that illiteracy rates are high, a shift in the mobile technology used from just SMS to IVR was necessary to ensure maximum understanding of disseminated information.

Conclusion

Interactive mobile solutions enable continuous engagement with the end users. Ensuring that the right contextual necessities for successful programs, simple guidelines, and good content are in place contributes to operational sustainability. Moreover, the usability of mobile phone services is user-driven with regard to language settings, user friendly interfaces, and speed of the platforms that can be used. Taking into consideration the above, various methods were used to ensure end users can benefit through the dissemination of information and encouragement of discussion among the users, as family planning methods are still very much spread through word of mouth.