



# HOW TO DESIGN AN SMS OUTREACH STRATEGY IN YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS

**S4YE “How-To” Notes**

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## How To Design An SMS Outreach Strategy In Youth Employment Programs

This Note is part of S4YE’s new “How To Series” that provides a quick step-by-step guide for practitioners and policymakers working to design new youth employment programs. This series covers a range of youth employment related topics identified in collaboration with S4YE partners and World Bank Group teams.

This Note highlights the six steps taken by the **Mexico Youth Labor Market Inclusion (MYLMI) project** to design a successful short message system (SMS) outreach strategy to incorporate youth voice in their project. The project focuses on generating evidence on interventions that promote the labor inclusion of low-income youth into formal quality jobs in strategic productive sectors. The project is being implemented by the World Bank and the Government of Mexico in the state of San Luis Potosi.

### OVERVIEW

Mobile phone network coverage has increased worldwide over the past two decades. In advanced and emerging economies alike, young people are much more digitally connected than older generations.<sup>1</sup> Digital technologies offer an opportunity to communicate with youth and collect data at low-cost. Using digital methods like SMS has become more relevant to obtain timely data and information, especially with the current COVID-19 crisis.

The [MYLMI](#) project<sup>2</sup> used SMS to reach low-income youth between the age of 17 to 21 years graduating from upper secondary school before they enter the labor market to offer them a package of interventions to guide their study and work decisions, and connect them with quality formal employment opportunities in firms. The project focuses on the:

- (i) the design of an integrated supply- and demand-side labor inclusion approach, and
- (ii) an impact evaluation of a jobs pilot aimed at helping the insertion of targeted youth into quality formal jobs in strategic productive sectors.



**Figure 1.** Students in the MYLMI project.

The MYLMI project faced the challenge of collecting data from students after graduation from upper secondary school to support treatment uptake. Using a low-cost tool like an SMS platform seemed reasonably appropriate and easy at first, but was not always straightforward, as the MYLMI experience shows. The team used high-frequency data from the SMS surveys to gather data on:

- Employment status,
- Hours worked,
- Formality of employment,
- Job rotation,
- Level of satisfaction with the current job,
- Job search intensity,
- Approaches used to search for a job, and
- Access to higher education

<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center (2019), “Smartphone Ownership Is Growing Rapidly Around the World, but Not Always Equally” [https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/02/Pew-Research-Center\\_Global-Technology-Use-2018\\_2019-02-05.pdf](https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/02/Pew-Research-Center_Global-Technology-Use-2018_2019-02-05.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The Mexico Youth Labor Market Inclusion project has been made possible through a grant from the World Bank’s Jobs Umbrella Multidonor Trust Fund (MDTF), which is supported by the Department for International Development/UK AID, the Governments of Norway, Germany, Austria, the Austrian Development Agency, and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

## SIX STEPS TO CONSIDER WHEN DESIGNING AN SMS BASED OUTREACH STRATEGY:

### *Step 1: Be clear about the specific objectives of contacting youth via SMS.*

SMS-outreach can serve different purposes. It can be designed as an intervention tool or support program delivery as well as monitoring and evaluating youth employment programs. The first step is to define the primary purpose of using text messages to communicate with young people.

During the initial stages of developing the SMS-outreach strategy, the MYLMI team identified that the SMS platform would allow the project to reach a wide range of targeted youth. Additionally, the platform would be able to collect high-frequency data on a wide range of indicators (at a low cost) like school-to-work trajectories, labor market outcomes for targeted youth, and provide information and updates on project activities.

### *Step 2: Design a modular structure for the messages and sample outreach.*

Once a project has decided on the specific objective of using an SMS platform, the team must then develop a modular structure for the SMS strategy and decide on the content of the messages to be delivered. Some questions that the team would need to determine are:

- ***Should the SMS messages be delivered to a specific sample group or open to all youth involved in the program?*** Some questions may be relevant for the whole sample universe, and other questions may be relevant just to specific groups (e.g., youth working on a formal/informal job, youth working and studying, female youth, treatment group, etc.). The MYLMI project addressed high-frequency survey questions to the target population, while other messages were specific to the population in a wage subsidy treatment group and included sending updates and reminders about the registration process, requests for subsidies, and notifications on the delivery of the subsidies.
- ***How frequently does the team intend to seek feedback/send SMS messages to youth?*** While it is essential to maintain youth interest in the program by sending regular text messages, teams should keep the right balance and ensure that youth are not constantly bombarded with surveys or they might lose interest. For example, the MYLMI team sends reminders and surveys every two to four weeks.
- ***How many messages per round of texts does the team intend to send to youth?*** Shorter rounds of text messages are more cost-effective for a project and prevent youth weariness and loss of interest. The MYLMI team sends 2-4 reminder messages each round for project updates.
- ***What format (length, characters, close or open questions, poll survey) is appropriate to use on the SMS?*** Usually, the number of characters for SMS is 160, and special characters such as accent marks are not allowed. Closed, multiple-choice questions work best for SMS-based surveys. However, open-ended questions allow teams to obtain personalized answers from youth. The MYLMI team used mostly closed multiple-choice questions and eventually used open-ended questions on specific topics where they wanted more free expressions and opinions from youth. On average, the team formatted the messages to include no more than 15-20 questions per SMS message.
- ***What tone (formal, education, peer like discourse) does the organization intend to use in the SMS text?*** The MYLMI project learned that youth identify best with peer identification tone that includes relatable stories. Understanding the interests of the target youth in the local context can help design these messages.

### *Step 3: Finalize technical specifications and partnerships with telecommunication vendors.*

Technical processes to launch a successful SMS-platform can take several months. Teams need to have realistic due dates and have finalized contracts with vendors before rolling out. Teams should:

- a. Finalize technical arrangements with local telecommunication companies.** Depending on the employment program location, countries may have more than one telecommunication provider and/or companies providing a multicarrier service (a company providing access to various telecommunication companies). Teams choosing a telecommunication provider should consider factors such as:
- Companies that are more commonly used by the intended youth participants, and
  - The overall unit cost of each message sent.
- The MYLMI project team collected information about the telecom companies being used by youth participants during focus group discussions conducted during the design phase of the project.
- b. Teams should agree with the telecommunications provider about who will assume the costs for participants to send a response to the SMS message.** The MYLMI team assessed that it would be cost-effective if the project assumed the costs of the overall SMS-outreach strategy. This approach reduced the economic burden of the targeted low-income youth participants who responded to the text messages in the MYLMI project.
- c. The team must determine if the SMS platform data collection will be managed centrally through a vendor or in-house.** To make this decision, teams need to consider elements like:
- The flexibility required for data collection and storage (a vendor may have limited time to make last-time adjustments) and,
  - The amount of training that an in-house team will need to understand the functioning of the selected platform.
- In considering these factors, the MYLMI project collaborated with an international SMS-platform vendor named [Text.it](#). The team organized the technical conversations between the telecommunication company and the SMS-platform provider to connect their services. The MYLMI team decided to take the lead on the management of the SMS platform to ensure full control of the messaging content and logistics. By having full ownership of the management of the SMS platform, the team could determine how and when datasets containing the responses sent by project participants were retrieved.
- d. It is important that the platform be tested before it is launched to the targeted youth.** The MYLMI project team had to run several testing sessions until the service was ready to be launched as per project requirements. Once the procurement processes for all vendors were concluded, the technical set-up process took between 4 to 6 weeks.

#### **Step 4: Consider creating incentives for youth to respond to SMS messages.**

**Project teams should consider the types of incentives that could be offered to engage youth. Incentives can be intrinsic, economic, or a combination of both.** Depending on the type of incentives offered, some may require additional arrangements such as procuring vendors' services that will support the delivery of the incentives.

As described in the *How To Note Issue 1*, intrinsic incentives were also offered to youth in the MYLMI project by providing information about how their responses could help shape employment programs for youth in their region that benefit society. This encouraged youth to continue participating and sharing their perceptions with the project. Moreover, economic incentives that increase over time can help ensure the continued motivation and participation of young respondents throughout the project and can thus safeguard data quality and reduce attrition.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that while economic incentives such as mobile phone credit or monetary transfers raise the willingness of respondents to continue participating, there is mixed evidence about small versus large compensations to increase participation.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Dabalen, Andrew, Alvin Etang, Johannes Hoogeveen, Elvis Mushi, Youdi Schipper, and Johannes von Engelhardt. 2016. *Mobile Phone Panel Surveys in Developing Countries: A Practical Guide for Microdata Collection*. Directions in Development. Washington, DC: World Bank. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-0904-0. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO.

<sup>4</sup> Ballivian, A, Azevedo, J P, and Durbin, W. 2015. Using Mobile Phones for High-Frequency Data Collection. In: Toninelli, D, Pinter, R & de Pedraza, P (eds.) *Mobile Research Methods: Opportunities and Challenges of Mobile Research Methodologies*, Pp. 21–39. London: Ubiquity Press. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/bar.c>. License: CC-BY 4.0. <https://www.ubiquitypress.com/site/chapters/10.5334/bar.c/download/293/>

The MYLMI project incorporated economic incentives to boost and maintain response rates, ranging from \$1 USD, which increased in time to \$5 USD per survey completed.<sup>5</sup> A pre-paid card was delivered to participants while implementing activities at their schools. The answers to each round of messages provided a specific amount of points which would turn into cash that youth could store in their pre-paid cards, use them in any commerce, or even withdraw cash, using the pre-paid card as a debit card. An external vendor provided the pre-paid card service. Increasing the monetary amount of economic incentives helped increase the response to SMS survey texts by 38 percentage points.

**Step 5: Include checks and safeguards.**

**Once the strategy has been defined and the technical systems are established, the team should introduce the SMS platform to project participants.** The MYLMI project introduced the SMS platform with the students in the school in a face to face engagement during a labor market literacy workshop. Students were able to interact with the platform and ask questions about how it works. Introducing the platform in person and engaging youth about its functionalities also helped build a rapport with youth.

**The organization administering SMS-based surveys needs to ensure that it has the participant's consent for using the gathered data.** This consent may include parental consent, depending on the local laws that exist in the country. Project teams should also give participants the possibility to unsubscribe from the SMS platform whenever they choose. The MYLMI team collected signed consent forms at the time they administered baseline surveys at schools. Simultaneously, the team provided an option to students who may want to unsubscribe from the platform by sending the trigger word “UNSUBSCRIBE” via text to the SMS system. The system then automatically unsubscribed the student from the SMS intervention.

**Furthermore, many youth tend to lose their mobile phones very often, change phone numbers, and/or change phone company providers, which can impact the SMS-outreach response rate since youth may not receive the messages.** This can pose an attrition risk since the contact with participants is lost. These issues are significant challenges for practitioners attempting to implement their programs effectively. The MYLMI team addressed these concerns by having youth notify the team immediately about any cellular changes via SMS, email, phone, WhatsApp or Facebook, and by offering an economic incentive to youth participants who referred a friend (also targeted by the project) that had changed their cell phone number and made contact with the program team to update the new cell phone number information.

**Step 6: Schedule SMS messages and analyze the response rate.**

**Project teams need to keep in mind that the number of youth respondents fluctuates in time as not all targeted individuals will respond to each round of SMS surveys sent when conducting high-frequency tracking.** Therefore, teams must consistently assess reminders and the timing of SMS texts sent to help maintain and increase response rates. While analyzing the response rate, the MYLMI team realized that timing of the message matters. The team observed sending SMS surveys in the afternoon was most effective since their targeted youth are usually at work or school in the mornings. Additionally, the team sent reminders via text message for incomplete surveys every two days, which boosted response rates.

**CONCLUSION**

**The MYLMI project used the six steps described in this Note to implement a successful SMS platform to engage with, enroll, track, and support youth effectively.** Listening to youth insights through the data and feedback collected with the qualitative study allowed the team to fine tune the design and implementation of their program. Although SMS-based surveys may have limitations like relatively lower response rates when compared to other survey channels such as face-to-face interviews or phone-based surveys, they can provide at the very least a useful, low-cost mechanism to reach a large amount of youth in a short period. Additionally, it allows for the monitoring of information for a sample of the targeted population.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Through a qualitative study with participants, the MYLMI team learned that offering an electronic wallet could increase not just credibility but also commitment and participation in the SMS platform and other project activities.

<sup>6</sup> Lau, C. Q., Cronberg, A., Marks, L., & Amaya, A. (2019). “In search of the optimal mode for mobile phone surveys in developing countries: A comparison of IVR, SMS, and CATI in Nigeria. Survey Research Methods” <https://ojs.ub.uni-konstanz.de/srm/article/view/7375>

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S4YE is a multi-stakeholder coalition that aims to provide leadership and resources for catalytic action to increase the number of young people engaged in productive work. S4YE’s partners include the World Bank Group, Accenture, The Rockefeller Foundation, Mastercard Foundation, Microsoft, Plan International, International Youth Foundation (IYF), Youth Business International (YBI), RAND Corporation, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Governments of Norway and Germany, and the UN Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth. The S4YE Secretariat is housed in the Jobs Group within the Social Protection and Jobs Global Practice at the World Bank Group.

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