

Text to Change (TTC)

Country: Uganda

Sponsoring Organization and Partners:

CelTel, AIDs Information Centre (AIC), Merck, and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs



Spread the message stop the virus

The Project

Text to Change (TTC) provided HIV/AIDS awareness via an SMS-based quiz to 15,000 mobile phone subscribers during three months in Uganda. TTC was founded with the goal of improving health education through the use of text messaging, which holds the advantages of anonymity and strong uptake among the population. Partnering with the mobile carrier CelTel and the local NGO AIDs Information Centre (AIC), TTC conducted a pilot program from February through April 2008 in the Mbarra region of Uganda, with the objective of increasing public knowledge of and changing behavior around AIDS. The program aimed to encourage citizens to seek voluntary testing and counseling for HIV/AIDS.

An SMS-based multiple choice quiz was administered to 15,000 CelTel mobile phone subscribers in the rural region of Mbarra. Free airtime was offered to users to encourage participation in the program; this was determined to be a powerful incentive since users can exchange the airtime with other subscribers as a type of currency.

The quiz was interactive. When participants gave a wrong answer they received an SMS with the correct answer from the cell phone provider. The uptake rate of the survey was 17.4% and focused on two specific public health areas:

- General knowledge about HIV transmission
- The benefits of voluntary testing and counseling

At the end of the quiz, a final SMS was sent to motivate participants to go for voluntary testing and counseling at the local health center. Those who went to the center were asked a final question: Was this was the first time they had an HIV test? After testing, participants were requested to leave their mobile phone number so that post-test counseling could be arranged. For the people who came to the health centers through TTC, HIV testing and counseling was free of charge. Initial grants from Merck, the US pharmaceutical company, and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported the program launch.

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Forge Strong Partnerships

Successful mHealth projects require the participation of partners with expertise in the fields of technology, healthcare, and academia. Validation and testing are key steps in the conception of mHealth programs and this phase typically occurs within a university setting or a technical organization. In order to move to the implementation stage, however, it is essential to bring other partners into the project. Dr. Patricia Mechael of the Earth Institute notes that "The projects that have been implemented at significant scale have forged strong partnerships, either with a government or a private corporation." Mechael further affirms that the mHealth field currently finds itself in a place where a number of projects are in the design and testing phase that have not yet made the move to implementation. "As the diverse sectors involved in mHealth continue to collaborate and the corporate and political climate become more supportive we expect to see more projects move into the implementation phase."

Set Measurable Goals

As with any initiative, setting measurable goals establishes the barometer that allows mHealth projects to assess success or failure. It builds in the rigor that is required if course corrections are needed during the project. Once achieved, these goals, in turn, form the building blocks for success, allowing the project to move forward with larger implementations and broader partnerships.



Credit: Text to Change

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Objectives and Results

The quiz had two goals:

- Collect information. In particular, the program was able to assess the rate of correct or incorrect answers within certain socio-economic sectors, and pass this information along to UNICEF.
- Promote testing and counseling. The quiz notified participants of the location of the nearest testing center. If they stated that they were referred from the quiz, testing was free (there was normally a small charge for testing).

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In terms of information gathering, a key finding of the survey was that although people were quite knowledgeable about issues such as condom use, they did not think that AIDS testing was accurate or anonymous. This was a major finding, in that the population of Uganda had not been surveyed on this question before. TTC was able to pass this along to larger health agencies operating in the region, thereby contributing to the efficacy of existing health programs.

TTC co-founder Hajo van Beijma notes that “there was initially an element of risk for the funders since this type of project had not been conducted before, but now that we have proven results we have the opportunity to expand.” TTC is planning a follow-up program in Uganda in January 2009. One of the goals of this next campaign is to promote the safety and effectiveness of the testing center, and therefore specifically encourage testing.

In this phase, collaboration with local partners will be further strengthened, with the local HIV/AIDS organizations submitting questions. Text to Change intends to shorten the duration of the program to four weeks, hoping to minimize participant drop-out rates, and to include non-English speaking subscribers by enabling them to read SMS messages in their local languages.

The pilot saw the sponsoring partners benefit as well: Celtel (now rebranded Zain) reaps benefits not only from a corporate social responsibility (CSR) perspective but also through the promotion of its texting service. The testing center increased the number of tests conducted, placing them in a position to receive expanded funding.

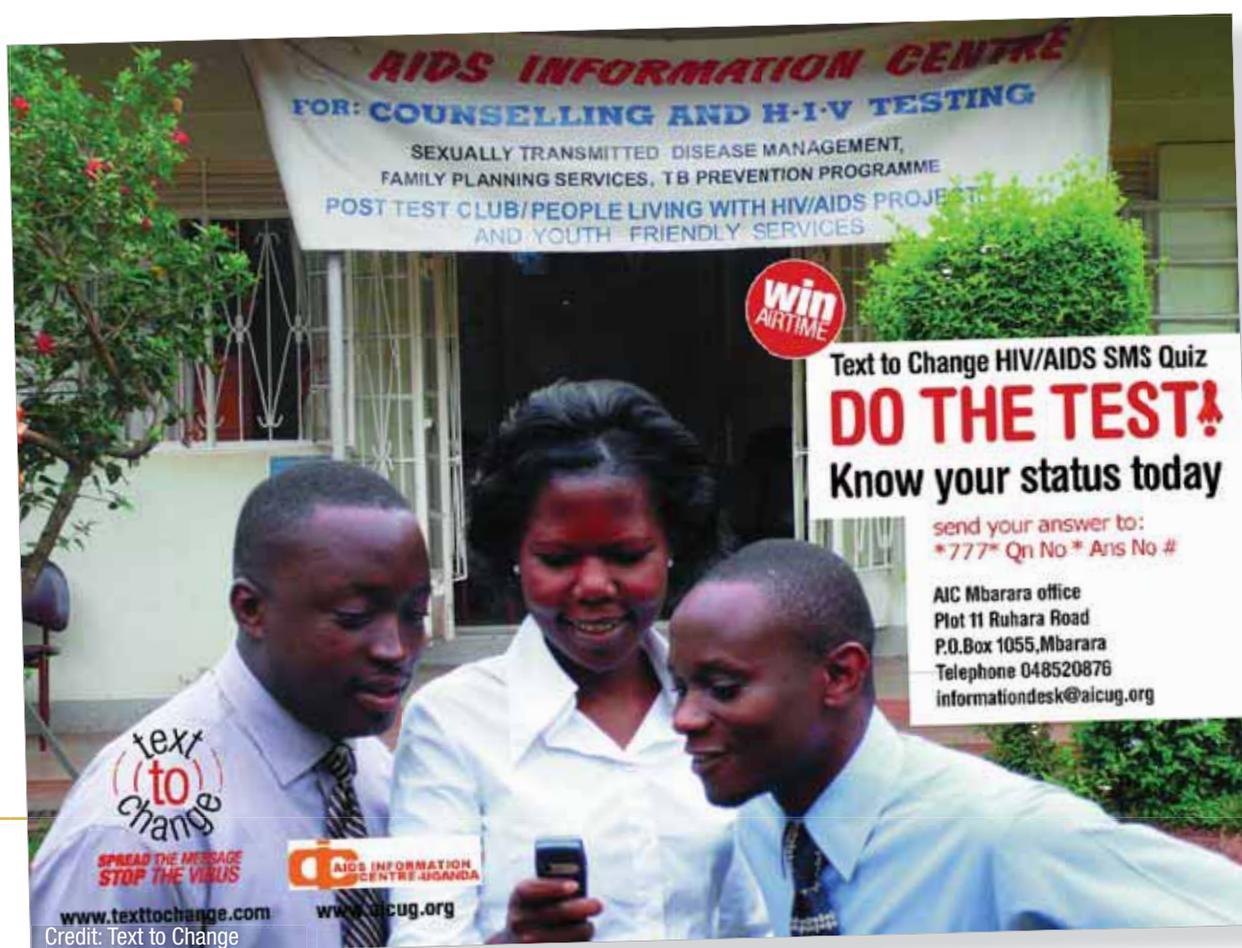
Future Plans and Scaling Challenges

Hajo van Beijma hopes to build upon lessons learned from the pilot. He comments, "After the pilot we saw that our initial program didn't have a good survey running. In the second round we developed a new survey with Ugandans, and used university students. Their IT knowledge is fabulous. They really know how to program these kinds of software tools in Uganda."

The new program in January 2009 will target 30,000 people, and ultimately TTC plans to do a nationwide roll-out. Van Beijma notes, "If we are able to prove that we can send out a large number of questions, that will lay the groundwork for the nationwide program. In the first pilot there were some issues with being able to send out a large number of questions at the same time."

Van Beijma cites several critical success factors for scaling Text to Change and similar mHealth projects. These include:

- Develop surveys in the numerous local languages. This would make their message more accessible to specific ethnic and social groups. Literacy is also an issue. However, van Beijma notes, "If people do not speak or read English and they get a text message they will ask their neighbor what it means."
- Secure ongoing funding. Though TTC is more cost effective than many other education programs, steady funding will allow for stable operations and growth.
- Collaborate with other mHealth organizations. Van Beijma notes that one of the consensus findings of the recent MobileActive conference in South Africa (October, 2008) is the need to set up a consortium to promote collaboration among mHealth organizations in different developing countries. "The goal is to work with organizations that are doing similar and complementary things in different countries. This way if we move into other countries we will combine strengths, for example, by developing software together."



Texting against AIDS

SMS message to promote HIV education

Can text messages help stop the spread of HIV/AIDS? Text to Change (TTC), a Ugandan NGO, thinks the answer is yes. To prove it they have teamed up with Zain to launch an innovative project that utilizes a technology that has been rapidly expanding to make sure that HIV/AIDS does not do the same.

Uganda has been widely hailed as Africa's "AIDS success story." In the 1990s, as HIV/AIDS epidemics were ravaging the continent, Uganda was one of the few countries credited with mounting an effective campaign to counter the disease. From a peak in 1993, when it had the highest infection rate per capita in the world with over 15% of the adult population testing positive, according to the World Health Organization, Uganda managed, by the turn of the millennium, to reduce HIV prevalence to six percent.

However, after such dramatic progress, there are now signs that HIV/AIDS may again be on the rise. While there's some ambiguity as to whether HIV/AIDS prevalence is increasing or has reached a plateau, the trend lines of mobile phone use in Uganda are perfectly clear.

The Uganda Communications Commission reports that the number of mobile phone users will hit the six million mark by the end of 2008. In urban areas, as many as 50% of people have mobile phones, compared to 10% in rural areas, according to the 2006 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (DHS).

TTC and Zain saw in the expanding reach of mobile phones an intriguing new way to combat the disease.

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Spread the message *stop* the virus

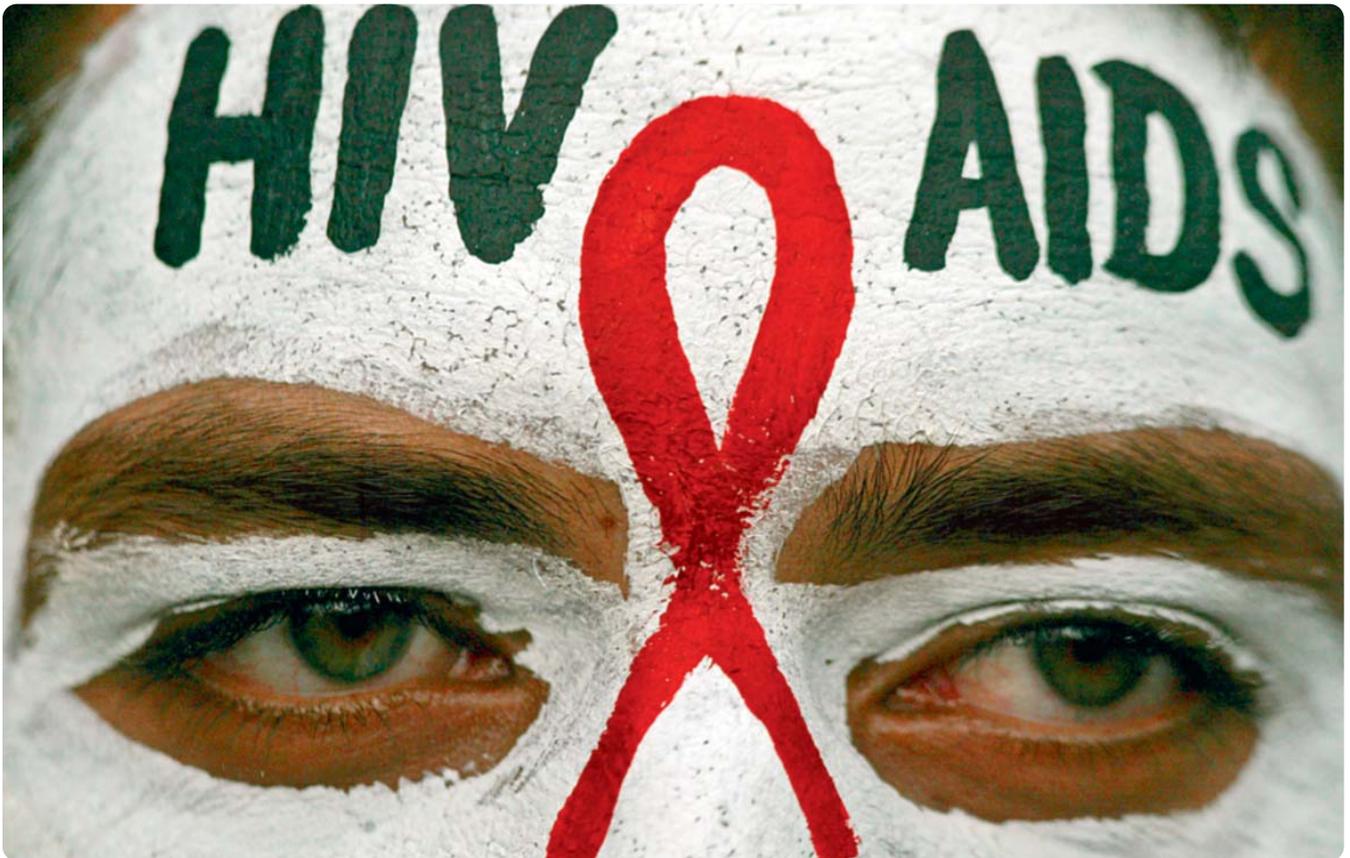
One of the most important reasons why Uganda managed to reduce infection rates in the 90s was that the government launched a campaign focused on educating people about the disease and encouraging them to get tested. Yet for all the campaign's success, the message did not make it to much of the population. Today in Uganda, while almost everyone has heard of HIV/AIDS, knowledge levels are often very low; the DHS found only about 30% of women and 40% of men had an accurate understanding of the disease.

The TTC project is an effort to better reach that uninformed majority by harnessing the powers of a technology that is changing the way Ugandans communicate with each other.

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Beginning on Valentine's Day 2008, some 15,000 Zain subscribers in the Mbarara district in southwestern Uganda received an introductory text message asking if they would like to participate in a free interactive quiz about HIV. In order to entice subscribers to respond, rewards such as handsets and airtime were offered for correct answers.

Once a subscriber agreed to participate he or she received a text once a week with a new multiple choice question, such as "What is the difference between HIV and AIDS?" and "How is HIV transmitted?"



Those who got the question right automatically received a message offering free HIV counseling and testing and the opportunity to enter a draw to win various prizes, while those who didn't, received a message explaining the correct answer.

About 2,500 of the 15,000 subscribers contacted responded to each question. At the end of the trial period of questions and answers, all participants were encouraged to go for voluntary counseling and testing (VCT). TTC said that "the response level of our pilot Quiz was on average 15% per question." (<http://www.texttochange.com/projects.html>)

Winners of the HIV quizzes were invited to an award ceremony on the April 18, 2008 at AIC Mbarara branch premises, where they received mobile phones.

As a means to encourage people to get tested, the program seems to have been as effective as its organizer's had hoped. According to Robert Natlaka, AIC's representative, requests at their central Mbarara facility rose by 100 percent over the pilot's six-week duration." Natlaka said that "255 [participants] turned up to AIC in Mbarara for testing; some others also went to AIC partners [around] the district."

The Mbarara branch of the AIC confirmed that people who came for VCT, did so because of the SMS messages received, the radio program and the organized marching through Mbarara Town. The program was officially launched

by His Lordship the Mayor of Mbarara Wilson Tumwine. In his speech he praised the ground breaking Text to Change initiative. He said that all good things start with a good idea and claims to be very proud that Mbarara has been chosen for the pilot. He said that this programme has the potential to change the lives of the people in Uganda and especially those in rural communities.

Bas Hoefman, the public relations officer at TTC, noting the increased traffic at counseling and testing facilities, said that the "launch has been a huge success." Still, he added, "this program is a pilot and meant as a trial to see if the approach could be successful. The next step is to run the SMS quizzes in the local languages, so that the people in the rural areas, who don't speak English, can also be reached with HIV/AIDS sensitization messages. In the end, we want the quiz to be accessible for every Ugandan."

The project's goals are not limited to Uganda. Indeed, TTC's ultimate ambitions are global. As Hoefman says, "Besides the enormous growth of Mobile telephony in Africa, we think that the anonymity of mobile phones could be the reason that the program will become an enormous success. We genuinely believe that mobile telephony is the key to reach people with health communication messages in third world countries and especially in Africa. Therefore, it is our firm ambition to become a global platform of telephony based health services."