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Text for coupons, text for love

By **TIFFANY ARNOLD**
tiffany@herald-mail.com

Text-messaging has outgrown its function as a means of sending instant stealthy greetings.

Lovers have been dumped via text message.

Managers can communicate with staff via text message.

Pizza coupons can be acquired via text message.

Text-messaging can be used for almost everything - which is good and bad.

"It works both ways," said Elayne Rapping, a professor of American studies who specializes in media and pop culture at the University of Buffalo. "It can be good and useful, and then there are the frivolous uses."

The omnipresence of text-messaging has its benefits, especially for members of law enforcement, who can now send Amber alerts via text message.

Text-messaging is also useful during a catastrophic event, such as a hurricane or the recent bridge collapse in Minnesota.

"You have a better chance of getting through," said John Walls, vice president of public affairs for the Washington, D.C.-based trade group CITA - The Wireless Association.

He used an analogy of information trying to get through a pipe, when there are a bunch phone calls crowding the pipeline. "Texts are one-one hundredth of the capacity of a voice call. It just needs a small opening to get through," Walls said.

But texting also has its downside.

The technology is reflective of a broader social trend, where face-to-face communication is waning and people have become more dependent on technology, Rapping said.

"There's something annoying to me to have pressure put on me to buy and use things that 15 years ago I could have done without," Rapping said.

Sometimes, the lack of face-to-face communication is preferred - like mitigating a breakup.

Angela Brown, a junior at Catoclin High School in Thurmont, Md., said she broke up with a guy via text message.

"We were only dating for like two weeks. He was pretty hurt by it, but I was fine," Angela said. She said she felt bad about it and would never do it again.

Teenager Josh Windbeck of Boonsboro said he has been dumped via text message. "She didn't want to do it in person," he said. "She didn't want to do it over the phone."

Alex Fields, a sophomore at Boonsboro High School, said he's never broken up with a girl via text message, but he uses the technology to talk to girls and once held a 30-minute conversation via text message.

"Sometimes, it will be somebody I like, so it comes out better through texts. I'm kind of shy," Alex said.

Pervasiveness of text-messaging

Cell-phone users sent about 158 billion text messages last year - nearly double the 81 billion or so that were sent in 2005, Walls said.

Texting also skews young.

The typical texter is generally between 13 and 28 years old, said Derrick Oien, president and co-founder of Inter casting Corp., a company that provides mobile social networking platforms that enable wireless telephone companies to offer Web-based social networking sites to their subscribers.

He said that age range will expand as older generations become more familiar and accepting of the technology.

Oien said, throughout his career, he would communicate with his staff via text message and instant message.

The most common use for text-messaging is social networking, Oien said, and young people are already using their MySpace and Facebook pages to communicate with one another by sending texts to the Web sites.

Businesses are trying to tap into this market by allowing users to use their cell phones to post messages via text message on their personal Web pages.

Allen Hood, 18, of Waynesboro, Pa., sends 50 to 60 text messages a day, generally about "random things" to his friends.

"It'll be something like, 'Hey, check out your MySpace page,' or, 'Hey, do you want to go to the movies later?'" Hood said.

Where it's all headed

As technology continues to progress, so does the concern that over time people will be constantly bombarded with information.

Oien said that threat will spur the creation of software that allows people to better control the information coming in.

"It's going to come to a point where new technology will enable people to control this flood of information," Oien said. "People will be able to control how others communicate with them."

Think of it as being able to screen your texts, just like people screen phone calls. Or converting phone messages to text messages, or having a single piece of software gather together all the incoming forms of

communication - whether it's from a home phone or cell phone - and sorting it for you based on the ones you actually want to receive, Oien said.

GrandCentral.com, which Google recently acquired, is a Web site that allows its users to funnel all of their phone numbers - work, home and cell - into one number. Users also can receive voice mail notifications via e-mail or text message.

GrandCentral also has a Web call function that allows its users to call people from a Web page.

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