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Should you be your own SMS vendor?

Overview:
There are a variety of options to consider when planning text messaging projects. Typically, a vendor provides a web-based interface into which subscribers' cell phone numbers are entered, along with the text messages you want to send. The vendor builds and manages the database, and links your messages with an aggregator or directly with the cell phone carriers for delivery. However, you can build your own application to manage some (or most) of this process. We conducted an analysis to compare contracting with a vendor vs. building some or all of the application yourself.

Method/Participants:
ComGroup Inc. conducted the cost analysis in consultation with our texting team.

Results:
ComGroup Inc. came up with four options:
1) Use a fully hosted vendor solution. Typically, you'll be provided with a web-based interface that you and your program administrators can use to input and manage subscriber lists, and schedule and send text messages.
2) Commercial Off-the-Shelf (COTS) solution. Your agency purchases the application, develops or modifies the user interface and hosts the database. You house the physical infrastructure and servers needed to support the COTS application. This option requires professional services to customize the database, and internal resources to maintain the database.
3) Develop in-house SMS application. This solution requires internal resources to develop and maintain the recipient database. You own the user interface and database, and contract with an aggregator to transport messages to the carriers.
4) Develop application and operate as an aggregator with direct contact with carriers.

Option one is the easiest solution. There are many vendors that offer a variety of services at different price points. However, customer service and interface flexibility are limited. Security and reliability may be an issue, depending on your agency's needs. For example, you may not be able to text clinic patients if you cannot assure the security of an off-site server and database. Options two and three provide the most control over the operation and management of the SMS system. However, your agency needs significant expertise in application development and database management. Investing significant time and effort in a technology that is ever changing also presents its own risks. Option four is not a feasible option for health departments. We were unable to find any municipal agencies that act as aggregators.

Recommendations:
Our consultant found that Options 2 & 3 cost approximately 20% more than the first option, with an economy of scale being reached depending on the number of individual texting programs the department has. In addition, the relative flexibility and control over these options make them a good choice, depending on the ability and availability of Information Technology staff available. Option One is a good option for occasional smaller scale texting programs, particularly when staff are beginning to learn how to develop and run texting programs. Option Four is not a feasible option, in part due to its excessive cost (in excess of $4 million over five years).