



Getting started with texting for audience engagement

Are you looking to implement texting into your audience engagement strategy? There are numerous platforms out there, all with their own quirks and features. Here is a guide on how to implement a texting tool into your news organization.

What is your goal?

Identifying your goals for using texting as an engagement tool will help you identify the best platform for your organization. Are you looking to reach new rural audiences? Are you looking to engage younger audiences? Are you looking to be a resource tool for communities in crisis?

Find the information needs of your target audience and how you will use texting to meet those needs.

What features do you want?

Knowing what features your organization wants and needs will help you narrow down the number of platforms you reach out to.

Here are some features you may want to explore:

- Customizable embeds for signups
- Automation capabilities (How can you use automations to reduce workload?)
 - With some platforms you can set up automatic responses based on keywords, questions and more.
- Phone number type (is it a 6-digit number or a 10-digit with local area code?)
 - Depending on your audience, a 10-digit local number may be more well received than a 6-digit.
 - You can also ask if different campaigns can have different numbers.
- Level of customer support offered
- Type of analytics and reports offered (Needed to track return on engagement)

How much will you have to spend?

Most texting platforms charge based on how much you will be sending messages and rates are typically tiered. If you're starting from square one, go in at the lowest plan. You can always increase your plan as you increase your audience.

Some texting platforms offer non-profit discounts ... *if you ask!* You could also look for buy-in from other parts of your organization such as marketing or membership to help spread the costs. Most platforms allow you to have separate audience lists so you can keep them separate.

As you reach out to platforms to learn more, keep detailed notes on their pricing. You can even ask them to email you an offer so you have it in writing. Keep in mind that some platforms may have high start-up costs. These are typically one-time fees for getting your accounts set up.

Monthly fees from platforms can range from \$99-\$500 for the lowest tiers and start-up costs can range from \$0-\$1,200. Platform plans vary and change often so reach out to platforms for their current pricing.

Do the demos

Request a platform demonstration from each company you reach out to. This will give you a chance to see the tool, identify how easy it is to use and ask questions about how it works.

Some companies offer recorded demos but you can also request a live demo so that you can get your questions answered in real time. Make sure they walk through how to use all the features you may use in your organization.

What platforms are out there?

Here is a list of some of the best known texting platforms out there with varying capabilities. It's not an exhaustive list, but a good place to start. For the most up-to-date information on pricing and features, visit companies sites.

- [Subtext](#) - a service with no start-up fees and basic level support, several ways to implement automation and customizable sign-up embeds
- [GroundSource](#) - a more expensive platform with on-going support, automation and customizable sign-up embeds
- [Zingle](#) - basic service with low monthly fees, low start-up fees; limited automation but no custom embeds.
- [Text Magic](#) - no start-up fees, email support only, no automation or custom embeds.
- [Public Input](#) - a broad platform offering texting services plus a number of other services; relatively pricey

Do some reading

Plenty of news organizations are already using texting for audience engagement. Tap into the available case studies, reports and texting tools from other outlets.

Publications using texting for engagement

- [Texas Tribune](#)
- [Block Club Chicago](#)
- [Austin American Statesman](#)

Readings and case studies about texting for audience engagement

- [Subtext lets journalists build deeper relationships with readers, one text at a time](#) (Nieman Lab)
- [Ideas & workflow for using GroundSource texting tool](#) (America Amplified 2020)
- [Amid rolling power outages, Texas news outlets are texting audiences with updates](#) (Nieman Lab)
- [Block Club Chicago's coronavirus hotline connects readers with questions to reporters with answers](#) (American Press Institute)