

Keeping up: U spk txt?

Older cell phone users are embracing text messaging to keep in touch with kids (or grandkids) and jobs.

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(Photo illustration by Glenn Asakawa, The Denver Post)

Bring up significant technological mileposts and 55-year-old Jan Scott thinks: electric typewriter.

But guided by her college-student son, the Littleton resident who labels herself "techno-challenged" has bravely embraced another — the youth-dominated world of text messaging.

"It keeps me connected with him and what's going on in his life," Scott said of her wireless link to 24-year-old Brandon. "And it's a fun way for him to teach me something. I taught him a lot over the years. It's time he pays back."

Statistics point emphatically to kids and young adults under 25 driving the tidal surge in text messaging — up fourfold in the past two years to almost 30 billion messages a month, according to the CTIA, a wireless industry trade group.

FYI

- [Visit](#) Netlingo.com, a website with an extensive glossary of text-messaging codes.

But growing evidence reveals that more mature demographics have been pulled — sometimes willingly, sometimes with trepidation — into the mix. They fumble with their cellphone keypads to connect with, and keep track of, their quick-thumbed kids; to stay abreast of their younger colleagues; and to enjoy quick, precise communication uncomplicated by any immediate human connection.

"Make no mistake, kids are the early adopters," said CTIA spokesman Joe Farren. "But everyone is doing it, and doing more and more of it."

Why now? Industry sources point to quadrupled U.S. wireless subscribership over the past decade — the number last month surpassed 250 million — that has saturated the nation with cellphones and their attendant text-messaging capabilities.

With almost any cellphone, users tap out messages of up to 160 characters and send them, usually to other cellphones. Both parties incur a per-message charge, around 10 or 15 cents, unless they purchase some sort of bulk plan.

Although more succinct than e-mail, text messages free busy users from their computers — and the time-consuming pleasantries of direct phone contact. The users of 8-year-old BlackBerry technology, whose addiction to the device spawned the nickname "CrackBerry," already know well the pleasures of wireless text communication. But now, almost everybody's in the game.

The uses for texting range from social interaction, a favorite among teens, to commercial transactions to news and weather alerts to voting for your favorite "American Idol" — the TV show some credit with giving the nation a prime-time texting tutorial.

When it comes to sending texts every day, teens and young adults rule, according to Mark Donovan, a senior analyst at Seattle-based M:Metrics, which studies mobile and wireless industries. About 21 percent of all users text daily, compared with 42 percent of 13- to 17-year-olds and 47 percent of those ages 18-24.

"The value of it has got nothing to do with the technology," Donovan said, "but rather the ability to be connected to people you love."

Hence, parents and grandparents have begun to pick up at least the rudiments of text messaging. However, they're less likely to engage in the idle banter that consumes 13-year-old girls and less likely to embrace the "predictive text" typing functions that fill in entire words with minimal keystrokes and allow thumbs to blaze across the keypads.

They don't seek out the technology as much as adapt to its utility.

That definitely was the case for Jan Scott, who realized the usefulness of text messaging for communicating with a son while he took classes at the University of Colorado Denver.

They could coordinate schedules. He could let her know if he was staying late. She could arrange to pick him up at the light-rail station.

But first, mom had to master the basics.

"She was hesitant," recalled Brandon. "She couldn't figure it out on her own, so I had to show her. She's teaching you your whole life, and it's suddenly turned around. But she came around pretty quick."

A connecting point

The process of young people instructing their parents can be gratifying for both — and the actual messaging can smooth relationships during a critical time, said Michal Ann Strahilevitz, a marketing professor at Golden Gate University in San Francisco with a background in social psychology.

"It enables them to communicate during a period of growing, where children are wanting independence and parents are wanting to stay in touch," she said. "Text messaging is sort of a compromise."

It also can be a connecting point. That's precisely what technology expert and radio host Ken Colburn impresses on his audiences.

The Arizona-based president of Data Doctors Computer Services advises parents looking for a way to connect with their kids to surprise them someday, perhaps while they're at school, with a simple text message.

I love you.

What would you like for dinner?

"Using that technology to start bridging the gap is very relevant," he said, "because it's ever-present in everything we do. Everyone has a cellphone. I've had a lot of parents say they were able to

actually talk about things in text messages that they couldn't have talked about in person — or at least opened the door to a conversation."

Terry Whitney got pulled into texting by a friend. But later, work demands sealed the deal.

One day, the 45-year-old legislative director for the state Senate Majority Office found himself staring at a text message sent to his cellphone by a buddy. He didn't respond.

He didn't know how.

"Oh, dude, it's easy," his friend explained in person a couple of days later.

"He took my phone and pointed to what I needed to do," recalled Whitney. "And boom! It's like riding a bike. With a lot of my guy friends, it's almost preferable to making a phone call. It's the way guys talk. It's very rudimentary — yes, no. There's not the need to be emotive or hear someone's voice."

When he started working at the Capitol in 2005, texting became a necessity — especially on the floor of the House or Senate, where he couldn't make phone calls. Eventually, his boss required everyone in the office to carry a plan that allowed unlimited texting.

"Probably not a day goes by that I don't text at least a couple of times," Whitney said. "During the legislative session, it could be 20 a day."

Tech fountain of youth

Aside from the obvious utility, or the connection potential between parent and child, text messaging can touch on some deeper sociological turf.

As adults grow older, says one expert, their communications habits become driven, in part, by a desire that their children or colleagues not view them as hopelessly technologically inept.

"The aging process now is almost a pandemic of phobias," explained Tom Donohue, a professor in mass communication at Virginia Commonwealth University who has studied the social impact of media since the 1970s. "So it's a kind of a badge that says, 'I'm staying current and young.' "

Consider [Eons.com](#), a social-networking site geared toward baby boomers 50 and older. A recent survey of 2,000 members found that 41 percent send and receive text messages on their cellphones, and 38 percent have sent one in the past 30 days.

Then there's [Grandparents.com](#), launched by 62-year-old chief executive Jerry Shereshewsky, whose site tackles technology issues such as how to produce a podcast for a long-distance bedtime story.

He points to the growing over-45 demographic on such hip sites as Facebook (25 percent) and MySpace (27 percent) as further evidence that older adults are tackling technology in ways their parents never could.

"It's not quite all about 20-year-olds," he said. "With our grandparent user base, it's another way to be in contact with their grandchildren, speaking in their language. It makes them very contemporary."

Doug Stewart, a 59-year-old telecommunications consultant in Aurora, has twin teenage boys and a teen daughter to help him negotiate the text-message learning curve.

"My 15-year-old daughter, when I looked at her T-Mobile bill, for the entire month she had three phone calls but 700 text messages," he said. "That's how I got introduced to it."

But now that he's directing Australia-based Firebird Corp.'s U.S. venture into the mobile-phone premium-content market, he's gone wild — relatively speaking.

Even six months ago, he was texting perhaps once daily. Now he's at about 20 a day and rising.

He still taps out messages to his kids, but he also can better manage the international time differences with his new colleagues via text rather than phone calls at odd hours.

By virtue of his work with Firebird, Stewart figures he may soon surpass his savvy teens when it comes to sending and receiving the latest cellphone content.

"It's very much trial by fire," he said. "But I don't resist it. I just embrace it."

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