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**PRESS RELEASE**  
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### **SMS improves communications for the Deaf**

Up until the beginning of the twentieth century, the island of Martha's Vineyard, off the east coast of the USA, had twenty times more Deaf inhabitants for its population size than the rest of the country. But the islanders didn't consider this hereditary Deafness a disability because the entire community, both hearing and Deaf, were proficient in sign language and this removed any communication barriers and made being Deaf a non-issue.

A 2004 research paper, *Everyone Here Speaks TXT: Deaf people Using SMS in Australia and the Rest of the World*, by Mary and Des Power, predicted that SMS has a similar ability to improve communications between Deaf communities, and wondered whether this would extend to relationships with hearing people.

Six years later headway has been made in some countries - with organisations such as the Child Africa International School in Uganda using SMS to teach Deaf children alongside hearing children - but there is still some work to do in South Africa.

Khulekani Trevor Ngcobo, programme manager at South African National Deaf Association (SANDA), agrees with this opinion. According to Ngcobo, SMS has definitely improved his communication with both Deaf and hearing communities. But it has yet to enable the Deaf community to better access businesses and services to its full potential.

Another notable gap is the lack of SMS communication channels to emergency services such as roadside assistance or insurance hotlines, which would be enormously beneficial to Deaf people.

It makes sense that so many Deaf people have adopted SMS as a preferred communications channel around the world. It is text-based, easy to use, affordable and is mobile. The vibrating function of the handset alerts the user about a message. Unlike other technology designed specifically for Deaf people, such as teletypewriters (TTY), it does not require each party to have bespoke equipment or rely on an expensive, time-intensive and intrusive intermediary to translate messages back and forth.

In fact, the Deaf community is simply following the global trend preferring SMS. Figures released recently by mobile maven Tomi Ahonen show that SMS is the most widely used data application on the planet, with 53% of the total world's population and 78% of the world's mobile phone users texting. Around the world, people are increasingly conversing using SMS, and making fewer and fewer voice calls, particularly in the youth market. It is not unusual for people to check their SMS throughout social engagements, and indeed to SMS friends in the same room, whether or not they are hearing or Deaf.

According to Ngcobo, who sends about 500 SMS a month, he uses SMS both socially and for business purposes to communicate with people and to get information. Thanks to SMS, he has a bigger social and business network and has had text conversations with people who haven't known he is Deaf.



He says that he is seeing business use of SMS increasing, and that account payment reminders and banking services are particularly useful. But there is room for improvement when it comes to businesses engaging with Deaf people via SMS.

“A Deaf person’s greatest problem is not simply that he or she cannot hear, but that the lack of hearing is socially isolating,” wrote Nora Ellan Groce in her book *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language*, about the Martha’s Vineyard community.

Add to this the importance of “weak” connections, that loose network you turn to when you are job-hunting or need an opinion on a holiday destination, for instance, and that is so important in providing an alternative point of view to prevent a group becoming too insular. SMS has been a contributor to Deaf people being able to form “weak” relations as it expands their communication from face-to-face engagements only.

SANDA is actively lobbying the mobile service providers to provide Deaf-specific services and it is possible to opt for SMS-only pricing packages in South Africa. Specifically business users and emergency services could offer more sophisticated SMS-based communication channels which no doubt would be rapidly taken up by hearing customers as well, given the popularity of SMS.

In addition, a lot could be done in terms of handset design to improve the SMS inbox, allowing messages to be searched, better delivery reports and better contact management.

The good news is though, that with the rise and rise of popularity of SMS, both Deaf and hearing users will both drive and benefit from these advances. And ultimately SMS has the potential to greatly reduce the social disability of being Deaf.