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SMS the crime fighter

By Dr Pieter Streicher, managing director of BulkSMS.com

The latest South African crime statistics for 2010/2011, released earlier this month, could probably best be summarised as “improving, but could do better”. While there have been reductions in the murder and attempted murder rate, assault, robbery and attacks on policemen - fighting crime should still be at the top of South Africa’s agenda.

With SMS being so suited to sending alerts quickly and easily to a group of people, its capability and usefulness as a crime fighting tool is not to be under-estimated. Probably the best-known application of SMS in the fight against crime in South Africa is Primedia’s Crime Line, an anonymous crime tip-off line via SMS that has made 1, 106 arrests and R39, 579 928 in seizures since its inception on the 6th June 2007.

The success of using SMS for tip-offs about a crime that has taken place is thanks to the fact that nearly everyone has a phone and is able to use SMS. People can send a tip-off immediately and discreetly when they witness a crime, wherever they are, and remain anonymous.

As well as tip-offs, however, SMS is ideal for quickly sharing important information with a number of people which can be effective in keeping people safe, preventing crime or apprehending criminals. Neighbourhood watches, security estates, schools and any other communities can quickly alert their members to dangerous situations. They can also gather information from members of the community to allow police services to respond faster.

Nico Nel, the past Chairman of the Linbro Park Community Policing Forum in Sandton , Gauteng, has no doubt about the effectiveness of SMS in fighting crime. “We originally subscribed to BulkSMS.com to communicate with the Domestic for the Domestic Watch programme run by Making a Difference with Penny Steyn. Our Domestic receive a crime fighting lesson from her, once a month and Penny is now using the system to alert and remind Domestic to attend her lessons throughout the Johannesburg region – some 3,000 a month! SMS is the most effective method of keeping in touch with the part of a Community that does not have access to email,” he says.

In terms of crime in Linbro Park, “Crime in Linbro Park is down to its lowest level in 20 years,” he continues. “We used to have between three and seven armed robberies a month and at one stage that many in a week. In the past 30 months we have had virtually none. SMS is integral to our fight against crime. We now pay a reward of a R30 recharge voucher for each crime tip-off, or more, according to the circumstances. This has made Linbro Park a place where criminals have no place to hide. We then react, where applicable, by sending bulk SMS messages to alert the Community, including our domestics”.

Linbro Park Community Policing Forum uses SMS messaging to alert the community to a crime in progress, and says that they have caught criminals red-handed on more than one occasion as a result of these SMS alerts. “Bulk SMS is particularly effective because it is quick to use and the delivery of messages is virtually instantaneous, whereas SMSing to various individuals from your cellphone is quite slow,” says Nel.



Community-based security via SMS can take several forms, from informing all households of a crime; to having mobile members of the community such as estate agents, plumbers and so on share information; to communicating with more formalised neighbourhood watch organisations and the police.

In Linbro Park, on receiving a crime alert, members of the community have pre-determined duties – some will man access points to the suburb to prevent criminals fleeing, others with trauma training go to the scene to render medical and other assistance, others will patrol streets on the lookout for criminals. All keep a watch for any presence of the criminals in the suburb.

In these contexts it is vital to manage the flow of information while ensuring the information is accurate. Two key considerations are that an SMS alert doesn't cause panic or incite vigilante activity. Using a bulk SMS system, it is possible to ensure that information is shared from a central community safety hub, whose responsibility is to check the accuracy of any information they receive from members of their community. With a SMS messaging solution, the hub is able to send out messages to predetermined groups of contacts within the community, for example, neighbourhood patrol leaders. The community should be educated about what is expected of them when they receive an SMS alert that is crime related, in order to avoid them being placed in danger.

So while there has been talk of the South African government banning communications technology such as Blackberry messages for security reasons, and both BBM and SMS has been temporarily banned in several countries around the world during times of civil unrest, the crime-fighting power of technologies such as SMS should not be overlooked.