RCS: the next-generation native messaging service

By Douglas van Wyk
6 Feb 2020

While Short Message Service (SMS) remains the most popular chat app in some parts of the world, including Africa, it is fast evolving into a technology that businesses can rely on to meet the changing expectations of today's connected consumer.

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The next generation SMS that comes native on smartphones is known as Rich Communication Service (RCS) and is an advancement that will bring enhanced features to the standard SMS experience we have all come to know and love across mobile devices.

Despite seeing huge uptake among mobile users since its introduction in the 1990s, SMS has evolved very little over the years and cannot necessarily deliver the same kind of rich communication experience that today's smartphones are able to support with other channels such as WhatsApp.

Customer engagement

In contrast, customer expectations of how they engage with brands and businesses have evolved massively during this time. The modern consumer expects that the sharing of information should be as engaging as face-to-face communication.

In response to this, RCS will deliver enhanced features to the standard SMS platform across mobile devices. In turn, this will help businesses engage with their customers and build deeper relationships through which better business outcomes can be achieved.

Developed by industry promoters in 2007, RCS has subsequently received support from 47 mobile network operators, 11 manufacturers, and two Operating System (OS) developers, namely Google and Microsoft.

Gaining popularity

As of October 2019, RCS was made available through 81 operators in 55 countries. However, this is projected to increase to 135 operators by the first quarter of 2020. RCS has approximately 300 million monthly active users worldwide, nevertheless, it has yet to be adopted by all the networks in South Africa.

The popularity of the chat app is further underpinned by the results of a recent study that found that "nearly 80% of consumers find RCS appealing and 74% say RCS would make them more likely to want to communicate with a brand".

The reasoning behind the development of RCS is that it provides a far richer media experience, similar to what is currently seen on chat apps such as WhatsApp. As a result, users can send pictures, videos, audio, emojis, memes, and texts, while also being able to exchange files, share locations, and create group chats, all with advanced and more visual user experience.

As a channel, RCS has tremendous potential to bolster business communication, with distinct advantages over SMS and WhatsApp Business API. SMS only caters for basic communication, while the recent introduction of WhatsApp Business API does give enterprises and their clients the ability to interact with each other with enhanced media but currently does not allow promotional messages.

However, WhatsApp Business API is still very new and has specific limitations and user policies, such as the inability for enterprises to initiate an interactive media message to end-users, as only plain text templates are allowed.

Rich media content

RCS enables rich media content to be pushed at any time to end-users who have opted in to receive these messages. Moreover, there is also the possibility that the content can be zero-rated to end users, increasing the potential uptake for enterprises. Therefore, the use cases are endless for both marketers and customer care departments in any organisation.

In the messaging ecosystem, RCS is another channel that is key to delivering value to enterprises by taking the complexity of multi-vendor and multi-application set up and maintenance out of the way by providing a single interface, via a portal or an API, to manage an enterprise's communication needs.

It's important then, when looking to partner with an omnichannel communications platform provider to ensure their service offering is backed by years of expertise and continuous development of the platform. This will ensure enterprises can stay up to date with industry trends. and changes without the need for any additional investment in people and resources.

RCS has been available to South African users for some time now, but connectivity over the infrastructure of Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) is required to unlock the value that RCS messaging delivers.

There needs to be an industry push for MNOs to enable and adopt RCS by engaging with our sales force and exploring use cases that will encourage them to move faster. Once that happens, we will see a shift towards this channel that delivers a host of business benefits.

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