The Messaging Crossroads: WhatsApp vs RCS vs SMS

This guide is based on interviews with leaders at SUGAR Cosmetics, MyGlamm, ImpactGuru, Cashify, Neeman's, and multiple QSR and retail brands, as well as insights from CPaaS providers including Karix, Infobip, LimeChat, and Tanla.

Introduction: Rethinking Business Messaging

If you're reading this, you already know the playbook is broken. You've watched WhatsApp costs climb, SMS get tangled in red tape, and every "next big thing" overpromise and maybe underdeliver. But you still need to deliver results—at scale, under new compliance rules, and without blowing your budget.

This guide isn't about explaining RCS. I**t's about helping you decide: Where does RCS actually outperform WhatsApp and SMS—factually, not hypothetically?** Which brands are seeing real ROI, and how are they doing it? What regulatory landmines can you sidestep by getting your channel mix right? And with RCS for iOS coming in, what can you expect?

# Cutting Through the Noise: Benchmarking Your Options

If you want to cut through the noise, benchmark your options, and walk away with a channel strategy you can defend in the next leadership meeting, this is the doc you actually need. The numbers* tell the story:

- India's business messaging ecosystem sends over 60–70 billion messages per month

- WhatsApp costs have risen to ₹0.80–₹1.20 per message, with ROI declining as user fatigue sets in

- SMS, at ₹0.15–₹0.20 per message, is now hamstrung by new suffix rules and DPDPA mandates

- RCS, priced at ₹0.24–₹0.30 per message, is emerging as the strategic middle path
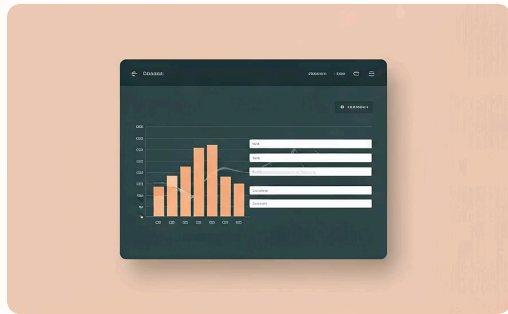
What We Cover:

The Real Cost of Business Messaging
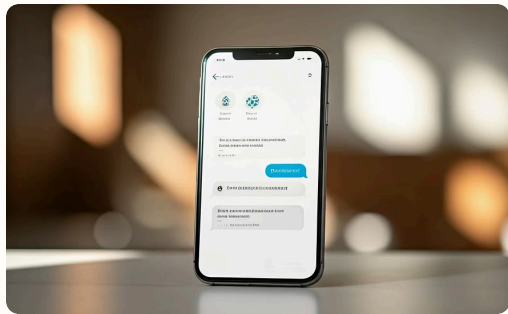
RCS in Action: Real Brand Use Cases

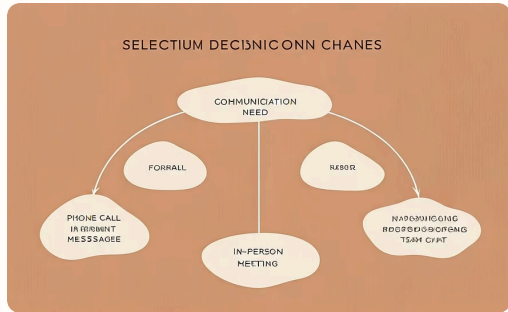**Metrics that Matter: Performance Tracking**

The New Regulatory Landscape

Are You Ready for RCS? A Checklist

What RCS Does Best (Today)

Channel Strategy & Selection

Troubleshooting & FAQ

Vendor Checklist & Partner Selection

Here's Your RCS Strategy + Scenario Mapping

The Future of Messaging & Featured Contributors:

The Real Cost of Business Messaging

Channel	Cost/Msg	Reach	Templates	Rich Media	Avg. ROI
SMS	₹0.15–₹0.20	Universal	Tedious	❌	2x
WhatsApp	₹0.80–₹1.20	Limited	Easy	✅	5–6x
RCS	₹0.24–₹0.30	Android-only	Medium	✅ ✅	4x

RCS in Action: What Real Brands Are Doing

Mini-Case Gallery

A QSR/FnB Brand

"WhatsApp delivers a lot, but RCS is our backup—costs 1/3 of WhatsApp, and works when WhatsApp isn't delivered. No SMS at all now. Approval times for RCS vs SMS feel like 2 hours versus 5 days sometimes."

A Retail Brand

"On Android, RCS is on par with WhatsApp. For iOS, we still use WhatsApp and email. RCS has completely replaced SMS for us due to deliverability issues and restrictions."

ImpactGuru

"SMS had low CTR, low ROI, and no scale. WhatsApp had scale but poor ROI, and users were getting saturated—we were sending to single users 3-4 times a week. RCS gave us traction at a lower cost. Out of our 30 lakh customer base, we reached 1 lakh via RCS. We experimented with both static and carousel creatives, with carousels performing better."

MyGlamm

"Can't beat WhatsApp yet, but RCS is better than SMS—we're seeing 5–10% conversion rates and ROI up to 10-15%. The best channel depends on customer purchasing frequency, behavior, and where they've purchased from before."

SUGAR Cosmetics

"RCS worked best for T1 cities, while SMS still worked best for T2 and T3. Our customer base will double after iOS integration. Relying on WhatsApp is not sustainable for our brand."

Cashify

"We saw 50–60% delivery rates in our early RCS experiments over a two-month period. It's definitely comparable to WhatsApp, not SMS. We're using rich card templates and carousel options."

Neeman's

RCS conversions and ROI are not only lower than WhatsApp but also lower than SMS. Earlier, the cost was higher, but we've now reduced it with Karix. Going forward, we'll begin experimenting with different audience segments.

Responses collected just before RCS was released for iOS.

Metrics that Matter: RCS Performance

- **Delivery Rate (DR):**
  - New brands like Cashify saw 50–60% delivery rates in early experiments
  - Established brands report up to 80% delivery rates
  - Still below WhatsApp's 90–98%, but significantly better than SMS for promotional content
- **Open Rate (OR):**
  - RCS open rates approach WhatsApp levels (60–70%) on Android
  - Lag behind on iOS (where RCS is not natively supported)
  - Significantly outperform SMS (10–20%)
- **Conversion Rate (CR):**
  - MyGlamm reports 5–10% conversion rates
  - E-commerce verticals seeing up to 15% ROI
  - Nearly on par with WhatsApp for Android users
- **Approval Turnaround:**
  - RCS templates approved in 2–5 hours
  - WhatsApp templates in minutes
  - SMS templates in 2–5 days

RCS Performance Metrics (2024–25)

Metric	SMS	WhatsApp	RCS
Delivery rate (DR)	70–90%	90–98%	50–80%
Open rate (OR)	10–20%	60–80%	60–70% (Android)
Conversion rate (CR)	1–2%	5–10%	5–10%
ROI (avg)	2x	5–6x	4x
Creative flexibility	Low	High	Medium–High
iOS support	Universal	Universal	Limited

The New Regulatory Landscape

SMS Suffix Rules: The Game-Changer

In 2024, TRAI introduced new suffix rules requiring all sender names to end with a category identifier:

- P = Promotion
- T = Transaction
- S = Service
- G = Government

This seemingly simple change has had profound implications:

- Promotional SMS can no longer be disguised as transactional
- Template approvals have become more stringent
- Nearly 40% of India's SMS traffic was temporarily disrupted during implementation

> Infobip noted: "The introduction of SMS suffix requirements to replace random alphanumeric sender IDs with clear, standardized brand abbreviations is a significant step forward. This change improves brand visibility, message authenticity, and consumer trust."

Regulatory Shifts: Not Just Red Tape, but a Strategic Wake-Up Call

> "The recent enforcement of SMS suffix regulations is a clear signal that regulatory scrutiny in Indian digital marketing is tightening. At LimeChat, we see this as a wake-up call for brands to shift towards more compliant, personalized, and interactive channels like WhatsApp. Over the next few years, we expect a broader framework to emerge around consent, attribution, and AI-driven communication — pushing marketers to focus on real engagement rather than mass-blasting. It's a pivotal moment to invest in channels that are both effective and future-proof."
>
> ~Aniket Bajpai, Co-founder, LimeChat

DPDPA and Consent Management

The Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA) has raised the bar for consent management:

- Explicit consent is now required for marketing communications

- Digital consent rates remain low, especially for offline customer acquisition

- Brands are struggling with bulk consent upload options

> *"New regulations, including DPDPA, present unique challenges, especially for promotional activities. Enterprises often lack comprehensive visibility into end-consumer preferences, partly because digital consent rates remain low. Many consumers still provide data only through offline interactions like store walk-ins, limiting brand reach and personalization. This gap is pushing marketers to explore alternative communication channels such as RCS, particularly for cross-selling and upselling efforts."*
>
> *~Shivasankar Padhy, Solutions Architect at Infobip*

WhatsApp Restrictions

Meta has also tightened the reins on WhatsApp business messaging:

- No more than 10 emojis or 550 characters per marketing template

- Text truncation after 4–5 lines; users must tap "Read more"

- 24-hour messaging window constraints

- Rising costs (up 20-30% YoY)

The 5 Signals That You're Ready for RCS

Checklist:

☐ Your Android base is >60%

☐ You're burning ROI on WhatsApp blasts

☐ SMS template flexibility is killing your speed

☐ You need visual-first, carousel-friendly messaging

☐ Your team is ready to pilot and test

What RCS Does Best (Today)

> *"RCS is a no-brainer for T1 cities. WhatsApp is burning budgets, RCS is 1/3 the cost. After iOS support, RCS reach will double."*
>
> *~Vaibhav Jain, Brand and Retention Marketer, Ex-SUGAR Cosmetics, GreenHonchos.*

Tech Differentiators:

- No 160-character restriction
- Rich visuals, QR codes, links, calendar triggers
- Future: Conversational flows, transactions (Google Pay, bots)

Template Types:

- Single rich cards with CTA
- Carousels
- Deep links to app/web
- Add-to-calendar
- UPI integration (coming soon)

Current Limitations:

- iOS compatibility gap: RCS is Android-only (for now)
- Discovery issues: Not all users know RCS is available
- Limited automation: Bots restricted to ~4/month (though some vendors offer workarounds)
- Personalization: No dynamic image rendering yet
- Delivery rates: New channels see 50-60% initially, below WhatsApp's 90-98%

But here's what's changing:

- Google is investing heavily in infrastructure and partnerships
- CPaaS vendors like Karix, Infobip, Route Mobile, and Sinch are pushing adoption
- iOS support is on the horizon, which could double RCS reach
- Regulatory pressure on SMS is making RCS more attractive

> *"RCS business messaging revenue is projected to grow 370% from 2024 to 2029, reaching £8.7 billion globally. Campaigns using RCS can see up to a 1633% increase in ROI over traditional messaging."*
>
> *~Juniper Research*

Beyond Creative: Setting Up Measurement & The Final Framework

> "The future of RCS will be more conversational. Right now, it's mostly 'spray and pray,' but it will evolve as people recognize the conversational potential and bots engage more. WhatsApp is now doing blasts, so people are starting to ignore them. RCS offers a different feel."
>
> ~ Aakash Kumar Singh, Growth Marketing Manager, Cashify

How to Track RCS Performance

- Track button clicks (via UTMs or direct CTR from CPaaS)
- Use GCLID/FBCLID for paid re-engagement
- Compare cohorts: RCS vs SMS vs WhatsApp on the same creative

Metrics to Monitor:

- Delivery Rate (DR): Expect 50-80% initially, improving over time
- Open Rate (OR): Should approach 60-70% on Android
- Conversion Rate (CR): Target 5-10% (comparable to WhatsApp)
- Cost per Conversion: Typically 1/3 of WhatsApp

Pro Tip: Create separate approval workflows for RCS. It's faster than SMS (2-5 hours vs. 2-5 days), but not instant like WhatsApp.

The Final Framework: Channel Logic for 2025

Campaign Objective	Primary Channel	Fallback/ Secondary	Best For	Notes
Transactional Alerts	SMS	WhatsApp (if consented)	Universal reach, Tier 2/3, older users	SMS remains the regulatory default for OTPs, order confirmations, etc.
High-Intent Nudges	WhatsApp	RCS (Android), SMS (T2/3)	High-value, repeat buyers, iOS, Android	Use for cart recovery, premium offers, loyalty; WhatsApp's costs justified by ROI
Promotional Blasts	RCS (Android)	SMS (T2/3, fallback)	Scale campaigns, visual offers, Android	RCS delivers rich creatives at lower cost; SMS fallback for non-RCS devices
Lifecycle Journeys	WhatsApp (if opted-in)	RCS (Android), Email	Onboarding, reactivation, feedback	Use WhatsApp for personalized flows; RCS for scale and visual engagement
Flash Sales/Events	RCS (Android), WhatsApp	SMS (T2/3)	Time-sensitive, visual-first campaigns	RCS for carousels, deep links; WhatsApp for urgency; SMS for universal coverage
Compliance/ Regulatory	SMS	Email	Legal notifications, policy updates	SMS is mandated for certain compliance communications
Community/ Content	WhatsApp	RCS, Email	Brand communities, content pushes	WhatsApp for engagement, RCS for visual content, Email for long-form or iOS users

"People are burning their money on WhatsApp. Meta has so many restrictions now. RCS gives you reach without ridiculous costs. It's not perfect, but it's not ignorable either."

~Vaibhav Jain, Brand and Retention Marketer, Ex-SUGAR Cosmetics, GreenHonchos

Channel Selection by User Segment:

- Tier 1 Cities: RCS performs nearly as well as WhatsApp at 1/3 the cost

- Tier 2/3 Cities: SMS still delivers better results than RCS

- iOS Users: WhatsApp and email remain necessary

- Android Users: RCS can replace both SMS and (in some cases) WhatsApp

Channel Selection by Vertical:

- High CAC industries (health, edtech, gaming): Use RCS for onboarding + education

- Deal-driven segments (QSR, ecommerce): Use RCS for repeat nudges, coupons

- Community-led brands (lifestyle, wellness): Use RCS as a lighter WhatsApp alternative

Troubleshooting & FAQ

- **Q: My RCS campaign isn't delivering to all users. Why?** A: RCS is Android-only (as of June 2025). Delivery rates are typically 50–80% depending on your audience's device mix and carrier support.

- **Q: Why are my SMS templates being rejected or delayed?** A: New TRAI suffix rules and stricter template approvals are causing delays. Double-check your template category and ensure compliance.

- **Q: How do I handle opt-outs and consent?** A: DPDPA requires explicit, documented consent. Use preference centers and clear opt-out mechanisms. Store consent records securely.

- **Q: What's the best fallback logic?** A: Use WhatsApp as primary, RCS as secondary (for Android), and SMS as a last resort for universal reach.

- **Q: How do I measure RCS campaign performance?** A: Track DR, OR, CR, and cost per conversion using your CPaaS provider's analytics dashboard. Use UTMs and cohort comparisons for deeper insights.

If You're Using WhatsApp and SMS — Here's Your RCS Strategy + Scenario Mapping

- **For high CAC industries (health, edtech, gaming):** Use RCS for onboarding sequences and educational content Fallback: WhatsApp > RCS > SMS Focus on carousel formats for complex information

- **For deal-driven segments (QSR, ecommerce):** Use RCS for repeat nudges, coupons, and time-sensitive offers Test rich cards vs. carousels (ImpactGuru found carousels performed better) Layer with SMS for Tier 2/3 cities

- **For community-led brands (lifestyle, wellness):** Use RCS as a lighter WhatsApp alternative Deploy when WhatsApp throttles delivery Focus on visual storytelling and brand-building

> *"We use WhatsApp for high-intent nudges, RCS for mid-funnel engagement and as a fallback when WhatsApp isn't delivered, and SMS only for transactional messages in Tier 2/3 cities. This mix gives us the best of all worlds—high engagement, reasonable costs, and universal reach."*
>
> *~QSR Brand Manager*

What's Next — The Future of Consent, Conversation & Commerce

- **Regulatory Evolution:** DPDPA will continue tightening personalization permissions RCS will likely face its own regulatory framework soon Consent management will become a core competitive advantage

- **Channel Dynamics:** WhatsApp fatigue is real—brands need alternative channels RCS will become more conversational, less "spray and pray" iOS support will dramatically expand RCS reach

- **Technology Integration:** Direct transactions via Google Pay within RCS More sophisticated bot interactions (beyond the current 4/month limit) Dynamic personalization and image rendering

Vendor Checklist & Conclusion

> *"The future of regulations is rapidly evolving, requiring coordinated adaptation among regulators, operators, vendors, and partners. While the initial learning curve is significant for all stakeholders, the move towards blockchain-based management is a promising development. It ensures transparency and creates a secure, immutable record of digital consent, enhancing trust across the ecosystem."*
>
> *~Shivasankar Padhy, Solutions Architect at Infobip*

Vendor Checklist for Choosing a CPaaS Partner

- Offers direct access to Google's Jibe platform
- Provides fallback logic (WhatsApp > RCS > SMS)
- Supports rich media formats (carousels, rich cards)
- Offers transparent pricing with no hidden fees
- Provides comprehensive analytics and tracking
- Has experience with regulatory compliance
- Offers template approval assistance
- Provides technical support and integration guidance

Conclusion: RCS Is Not a Bet. It's a Hedge.

The messaging landscape in India is more fragmented than ever. WhatsApp is effective but expensive and increasingly restrictive. SMS is cheap but hampered by regulations and poor engagement. RCS offers a strategic middle path—delivering WhatsApp-like performance (on Android) at SMS-like costs.

The numbers don't lie:

- RCS delivers 4x ROI at 1/3 the cost of WhatsApp
- Conversion rates reach 5-10%, comparable to WhatsApp
- Approval times are 2-5 hours (vs. 2-5 days for SMS)
- Android-only limitation will soon disappear with iOS support

The Future of Messaging & Credits

The winners in this new landscape won't be those who bet everything on a single channel. They'll be the brands that test everything, blend channels strategically, and prepare for a future where consent, compliance, and creative engagement are non-negotiable. RCS isn't a moonshot. It's a practical, future-ready channel that belongs in every forward-thinking marketer's toolkit.

Featured Contributors:

We wouldn't have been able to publish this report without the support of folks who've given us their input. We sincerely thank these folks for their insights:

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7. Atul Chauhan, Manager, Retention and Growth, The **Good Glamm Group**

8. With contributions from marketers advising top QSR, F&B, and retail brands (anonymous by choice).

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