



Mobile Technology in Africa: Spreading the Love

With the number of worldwide mobile subscriptions exceeding five billion, more people have access to mobile phones than to clean toilets. In developing countries, access to a mobile phone not only acts as a pivotal lifeline but as an educational tool and agricultural domain ruler too. With the world's focus on Africa and its position as a powerful realm of all that shines, technological developments are impregnating the continent with hope and possibility.

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Farmers in Niger use their cell phones to locate the best price in the marketplace for their goods. Using M-Pesa, Kenyans pay their bills and send money home to their families. Soon, mobile phones will even aid in the election polls and voting of African countries – as India so successfully managed recently. Mobile phones have erupted as the greatest demand and love all over Africa, as opposed to fixed line services, with five times more mobiles than landlines across the continent.

Advances in the area of wireless technologies in Africa mean there is a real chance of transforming communication initiatives, something that is especially pivotal in the developing world, which has until now been plagued by a rickety telecommunications infrastructure. Through various technological breakthroughs, including the combination of greater availability and cheaper costs, wireless access to remote and disadvantaged communities will soon be a reality, taking Africa into a new century of connectivity.

The most available and comprehensible form of wireless use in Africa is the mobile phone, which can be found in the hardworking hand of almost every African; whether as a communication tool or status symbol. For most first-time subscribers in Africa, a mobile phone is the first and only telephone they have owned, and the growth of mobile phone holders has been extreme. In 2001, 14 million customers were present; by 2003, 52 million. Nowadays, the number is almost double this. Something worth noting is the considerable imbalance between the adoption techniques and utilisation of these technologies among various African countries, ranging from the highly advanced rank of South Africa to the rather

slow-growing status of Somalia and Burkina Faso.

The cracking open of markets in the telecommunications sector, which has revealed the desire for connectivity from an African viewpoint, has been greatly assisted by the Basic Telecommunication Services Agreement, which opens up a competitive marketplace for Africa. Internet mammoth Google has reached the African continent from a mobile phone coverage perspective too. The titan has moved into Uganda through MTN and produced Google SMS, where plentiful applications are available to Africans on their mobile phones, including access to health advice, agricultural tips, sport and news – all via text messaging. Similarly, Google Trader, where buyers and sellers are assisted in making contact with each other; find, sell or buy products or services, is another available application, as is Google Tips, a service based on query and answer web searches at low cost to the user.

Google's goal is to reach a broader base of consumers who are hungry for information but have little or no access to it. The specialisation of these services has been through the Grameen Foundations Application Laboratory, in search of better breadth and depth of information relevant to the African market sector.

Cape Town is spearheading the mobile technology market of South Africa with initiatives flooding out of the city. It has been hailed as the continent's own Silicon Cape. MXIT, the free chat service for mobile that has been partly purchased by Media24, will soon be filtering into Africa too, with e-learners and live chat learning as well.

One Cape Town-based innovation hub is InfoDev, partnering with the Government of Finland and Nokia on a project called "Creating Sustainable Businesses in the Knowledge

Economy." They have a range of activities planned for 2010, one of which is the establishment of a regional mobile applications lab in Africa. The venue of the lab will be selected through a competitive bidding process that started in May this year. Some of the focus group discussions brought together mobile applications developers and academics in furious brainstorming on how best to create a lab in the Western Cape. Such a lab would aim to answer questions like: Which applications are relevant to a South African market place? Which partners/brands are to be led on board? How does this benefit the South African citizen? Initial scoping studies and focus groups have identified a company called the Bandwidth Barn as one of the potential host organisations for the lab.

Another progressive company, MCI, is in the vanguard of development of applications for the mobile cross-platform arena and is providing digital solutions for retailers and media houses in South Africa. On the brink of a mobile revolution lies the desire to take South Africa into a new era where digital platforms, mobile technology and digital-savvy consumers will be part of everyday understandings. MCI prides itself on its constant ingenuity and desire to add value to the African marketplace. It involved itself with the "World Bank Innovation Fair and Barcamp" by looking at ways to assist development practitioners in Africa to facilitate learning and generate and deliver relief aid with geo-referencing and tagging by mobile.

With mobile technology always in a positive state of flux, Africa and South Africa are feeling the push from all sides benefiting from the investments and innovation from the ground-level rural evangelist all the way up to the everyday technology crusader. ❁



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