

Africa must blaze its own mobile Internet trail

The global buzz about the coming of the mobile Internet is attracting lots of investment and interest in the sector - but anybody interested in Africa needs to understand that the continent is on a very different path from the developed world, writes Russel Stromin of Strike Media.

In the EU and North America, where it's taken for granted that all mobile phones are semi-permanently connected to the Internet, the market is all about bigger screens and faster access. It's hard to explain to people in this situation that South Africa has 20 million people who have never even seen the Internet, let alone have a use for it on their phones.

This doesn't mean there is no room for mobile Internet development in Africa - it just means the drivers are very different. For most African users, for example, managing the cost of their connectivity is crucial. It's not unusual to find users swapping out SIM cards from different networks several times a day: they're doing their own least-cost routing.

The cost of bandwidth will continue to come down, and uptake will increase in proportion - but anybody who wants to develop successful mobile applications for Africa will still want to ensure they're giving their users something valuable in return for their money.

Services that are valuable to users will be the ones that are useful, simple, uncomplicated and easy to use. They will make user's lives easier, or give them access to services that were previously unavailable or too expensive.

For example, the mobile Internet can deliver kiosk-based access to e-government services in remote areas, making it easy for citizens to register births and deaths, apply for ID documents or register for social grants and check the progress of their applications.

The mobile Internet can schedule clinic appointments, deliver weather reports to subsistence farmers, give access to live public transport timetables, and help political parties and unions communicate with their members. Within companies or government departments, mobile communications can distribute notices and deliver payslips, leave or overtime information.

The success of these applications - and the others that haven't been thought of yet - will depend on clever, economical development that's appropriate to local conditions. That means, for the moment, economical use of bandwidth as well as of cash. GPRS, rather than 3G, is the most that can be hoped for in many areas, and development that assumes fast access is not going to work.

In the developed world, mobile phones are used as supplements or occasional alternatives to laptop computers. In Africa, mobile phones are the beginning and end of the story.

Developers who are able to meet the requirements this imposes are the ones who stand to win.