Local digital content for Africa!

By Leigh Andrews   27 Oct 2015

The need for greater digital literacy was addressed at the recent Mobile360 Africa conference, especially in light of how this can in turn create more excitement about digital and mobile content that benefits the continent as a whole...

The second keynote of the first day of GSMA's Mobile360 Africa conference was on the power to discover, through local content and digital literacy. Moderated by Shyam Ranchod, digital advisory lead at Deloitte Digital, speakers included Sanjana Bhardwaj, chief of health and nutrition at UNICEF SA; as well as Candice Goodman, chair emeritus of MMA SA and CEO of Mobitainment; Ben Moskowitz, senior development director at Mozilla Foundation; and John Evans Totoe, CEO of Mobilecontent.com.

Local content drives digital literacy

Ranchod said if we are serious about digital inclusion, we must look carefully at local content services. This includes providing relevant and useful services for consumers that are created and curated in local languages, via the appropriate handsets available to different consumers. More than this, we should also consider how people can discover these services and capture the value they offer.

He added that it's possible to create a virtuous cycle where these usable, relevant services not only encourage phone adoption and usage, but also encourage greater digital literacy as people become aware of and excited about digital content. In turn, greater digital literacy can support an ecosystem where more local content is created and consumed.

However, in practice, the right kind of enabling environment requires that all players in the ecosystem benefit. It's a complex process that requires balancing of the commercial interests of operators, content creators and end consumers. We need to ask ourselves where is the right balance being struck and what the rest of us can learn from it.

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Before getting the opinion of each panellist on the topic, Ranchod said it's not well-known that unlocking digital literacy for Africa will offer untold empowerment and prosperity. It's about survival in an increasingly global world, educating young and old alike and inspiring each other to learn and grow.

Mobile considerations: Make it free, gamify participation, offer rewards

Goodman then explained the case study from December 2014 for Red Bull Kas'ilami, which won an AMASA Award last week for [best use of small budget](#) as well as a handful of 2015 [MMA Standard Bank SMARTIES](#)™ and is listed as a finalist in the mobile marketing category for the upcoming DMASA [Assegai Integrated Marketing Awards](#).

The campaign tapped into the use of a free missed call as a trigger for communication as well as offering consumer rewards and the opportunity to listen to mobile radio as it incorporated a free on-demand radio station. Goodman said this has changed the way local brands market themselves, opening the floor for content discovery and highlighting the importance of mobile content consumption. She also noted that the free entry mechanism is important, especially in Africa where people don't necessarily have airtime pre-loaded. In addition, the free missed call conversion was tracked for accurate reporting.

In speaking of the gamification aspect, Goodman said it was based on driving consumer behaviour and rewards for sharing, while the mobile radio on demand was a great way to promote local artists. In an emerging market where smartphone penetration is not yet high, you need to offer device choice, and remember connection issues based on 3G or Wi-Fi - consumer participation is often a question of cost.

When asked about the most effective rewards for the African market, Goodman listed the obvious one of music, but said when it comes to money as a reward, to rather think of sending it in the form of airtime and Wi-Fi access, as both make people feel safe as they know their bill is not being abused and they're connected. This is effectively changing the way rewards are logistically being given. Make it relevant to your offering and your audience's interests - send them free information like recipes and 'how to's as these are seen as premium content.

Bringing health info to your handset

Next, Bhardwaj spoke of her role at UNICEF, seen as the United Nations' child health wing, with a specific focus on the MomConnect pilot programme they launched in KwaZulu-Natal three years ago, as an example of the impact digital and mobile communication in particular can have on the medical realm. It was a first-of-its-kind project involving sending SMSes to pregnant women. This ranged from appointment reminders to pregnancy health and nutritional information, as well as a personalised SMS of congratulations from the provincial health department. The programme has since been scaled up across the country, with standardised messaging sent out.

Bhardwaj spoke of challenges of the pilot project, which she described as "a nightmare at the time to get right", firstly because SMSes are limited in characters, then in converting the message into different languages and still conveying the same message. This is linked to the need for consistency, not just across different SMS messages but broader communications offered, such as what the nurses and clinics were telling the pregnant women. It involved many returns to the drawing board. While the programme has seen successful sign-up figures, one of the biggest problems lay in determining who the handset the messaging was being sent to belonged to. It's not always solely owned by the intended pregnant person, nor do they want everyone else to access the messages they receive.

Rethinking the mobile handset

Echoing what Goodman had said earlier, Totoe explained Mobilecontent.com, which is active in in Ghana, Sierra Leone and Nigeria. He said it's been an interesting market journey from the plain voice and texting that comprised 'mobile' 15 years ago to how it has now become a part of everyday life. In order to get subscribers to see the mobile handset as part of their lifestyle, there came a perspective shift from just interacting with existing media like TV and radio, to also using the phone to interact with brands in sending a text message to win a prize.

Moskowitz rounded out the discussion by speaking about how providers and thinkers can provide new content for mobile, especially as mobile users become more adept at creating content in a peer-to-peer way. In order to change digital from being seen as "a place to consume", consumers need to be made aware of the possibility of creating digital content themselves and adding a level of tinkerability.
While images, text and links are core components of the web, we need to change how consumers view it from a platform to read, as they can now also write and participate.

Back in 1990s people were already looking for long-tail content, says Moskowitz. We need to incorporate it into next wave of the Internet and overcome the prevailing gatekeeper mentality based on competition and decentralisation through alternative platforms. He adds that when it comes to making content available on smartphones, the topic of data privacy comes up. Liability and risk are involved, and we also need to focus on aspects of curation and moderation of content. This has been set up in the existing digital content model but there are new complications that arise when we look to mobile content in particular, especially as it has a more conservative, personalised information flow.

Lots to consider when it comes to going mobile in Africa. Click here for a reminder of the first session of the day, on the implications of mobile access.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.
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