

The mobile web: an untapped opportunity for publishers



By Rick Joubert

19 Nov 2008

I had the opportunity to speak at the Bookmarks breakfast workshop at the invitation of the South African Online Publishers Association (OPA) last week both in Cape Town and Johannesburg. My target audience at this event was really the online publishers and my principal challenge to them was: 'Why has the South African online publishing industry not made any significant in-roads in the mobile web?'



Both events were well attended by both the existing online publisher community (both the large and the smaller players) as well as some specialist digital agencies - interestingly there were hardly any traditional full service agencies at these events (do ad agencies still not take the interactive media space seriously?), although there was representation from some media agencies like Media Shop and Group M.

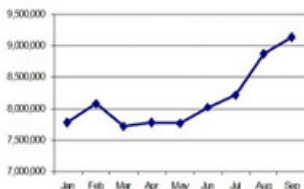
Some context to my question on why online publishers aren't taking mobile seriously, it seems:

- Although the mobile operator portals Vodafone live! (2.3m unique users), MTN Loaded and the chat service MXiT feature in the top 10 mobile web destinations for South African users and one or two local mobile content portals like Exact Mobile feature in the top 50 mobile sites; zero South African media brands feature in the top 50 mobile sites.
- Some international media brands (e.g. bbc.com) have a presence in the top 30 - proving there is a strong appetite; in fact in the case of bbc.com someone at the Johannesburg Bookmarks event made the statement that over 50% of all bbc.com traffic is originated on the African continent.

Further, even when excluding internet browsing on mobile phones using the native HTML browsers now available in most high end cellphones or the use of special browsers like Opera MINI (Opera MINI converts regular web pages to render properly on the small mobile screen) the number of unique South African users accessing the mobile internet using WAP is already just about double the size of the number of users accessing the fixed internet.

Below is my estimate of the unique monthly users of WAP in South Africa:

2008 - All networks, RSA, Unique WAP users



[click to enlarge](#)

In my opinion this user number will break through the 10 million unique users mark by early 2009.

But here's the one big fact which I'm not sure existing publishers have necessarily factored into their mobile web strategies: of the current WAP audience in South Africa approximately 70% do not have access to the fixed internet.

I get the feeling that to date publishers have thought about their mobile proposition mainly as a "convenient any time any place" extension of their fixed internet content.

While there is nothing wrong with this paradigm and if properly executed with integrated messaging, notifications, alerts and other elements which are unique to mobile (e.g. location), the content extension strategy can work well in the high LSM space (where the fixed internet is already being consumed).

A large mobile media opportunity however remains unexploited by digital publishers.

That is a strategy which is all about setting out to service the huge demand for information and entertainment content from a very large market segment for whom the ONLY current internet access is via the mobile phone.

First screen strategy

I like to think of this as the “first screen” strategy.

For many consumers the mobile phone screen is either the only screen they are exposed to daily (because they do not have access to the PC Internet or TV) or at least the most important screen from a content discovery perspective (because they do not have access to the PC Internet but do have access to TV).

A more well rounded mobile internet strategy for a large digital publisher in a market like South Africa therefore has to include more than only mobilising existing web content - if the internet publishing opportunity is to be maximised it should include the development of mobile media assets which address the information and content needs of the mass market, which is not a market segment the current large digital publishers are accustomed to serving.

These are the almost seven million (out of the current 9.5m) South Africans who are browsing the mobile web regularly but without access to the PC internet.

If the first screen publishing strategy represents a very significant opportunity in South Africa I would say it represents a massive opportunity in the rest of Africa where it is extremely unrealistic to think of fixed internet access penetration, with a current population penetration of about 1%, reaching more than 10% in the next five years (both because of the hardware and bandwidth barrier to entry and notwithstanding the undersea cable capacity currently being planned).

Because we have not yet seen the large incumbent media companies exploit this opportunity in any significant way it would not be surprising to see the emergence of a class of African mobile publisher entrepreneurs who are able to exploit the most ubiquitous, interactive and versatile of mediums the world has ever seen with very low barriers to entry and all the low infrastructure cost and distribution cost benefits of the internet.

One internet

Of course there is only one internet and some day it will be ubiquitously available on large screens and small screens alike.

A recent Yankee Group (www.yankeegroup.com) forecasts global shipments of mobile phones with native browser support for HTML browsing environments to hit 66% of handsets shipped in the 2012 calendar year - unfortunately though, the full browser skew will be in the high end phones and the number is therefore likely to be significantly lower in developing markets.

In my view the “one” internet for mobile and PC screens will be accessible by the African mass market only from around 2015 and media owners hoping for this convergence significantly before then may be disappointed.

For now digital publishers who ignore the potential of the first screen strategy to deliver the internet to the mass market risk losing out on the massive growth potential of digital publishing in developing markets and most certainly in Africa.

For more:

- RickJoubert.com: [More on the mobile web opportunity for publishers](#)

ABOUT RICK JOUBERT

In April 2007 Rick Joubert led the creation of a dedicated Mobile Advertising business unit in Vodacom, one of the first mobile phone operators in the world to do so. He currently heads

up the Vodacom Mobile Advertising business and also oversees Vodacom's initiatives in the Mobile Social Networking space. He joined Vodacom in 1999 and has held various executive positions within Vodacom, primarily in sales and marketing. View his blog at: www.rickjoubert.com
■ The mobile web: an untapped opportunity for publishers - 19 Nov 2008

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>