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Upwardly Mobile: Sente and sensibility

The less connected world could teach the UK operators a thing or two

By Jo Best

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Welcome to the first instalment of Upwardly Mobile, a new column from silicon.com senior reporter Jo Best which will cover mobile and wireless innovations from around the world - and what they mean to the UK.

Operators must spend a lot of their time wondering about mobile's Next Big Thing. New devices, new services, new things for consumers to spend time and money on. But how do they get their ideas?

From people like Jan Chipchase. I think of him as a friendly stalker. He probably doesn't. He works for Nokia and his job is to follow around average mobile users, seeing what they do with their average phones in an average day.

Some mobile users are obviously more interesting than others. Following me around for example would only teach Mr Chipchase that some people's ringtones have all the charm of a burst blister and that I'm ceaselessly amazed at my phone's desire to call people whilst in my bag or pocket. It would show him that I admire my mobile's ability to take the initiative in such matters but I really wish it would give it a rest and let me do the decision making.

Luckily for him he has more interesting people to follow around. He travels the world studying the ways in which people use mobiles that operators and handset sellers haven't even thought of yet.

Like the Sente system. Chipchase came across Sente in Uganda. If I tell you it's all about mobile payments you might be surprised - as far as I know premium rate texts and NFC aren't big in Uganda. But Sente is.

Sente is a way of sending money from one individual to another - Western Union without the infrastructure, if you like.

The money sender buys a mobile top-up voucher from their local seller. Only they don't top up their mobile, they top up that of their local village middleman, say, with $5-worth of credit. The middleman takes out his commission and passes on what's left on the top up as cash to Person A's friend, relative, creditor, whoever, in another village somewhere else in Uganda.

So what does the middleman do with all this top up on his phone? After all, it's good to talk but it's not that good.

He sells it on. He becomes a very small-scale telco in his own right, puts his mobile in a little kiosk - a phone box, if you will - and charges people to use it on a per minute basis.

Uganda is not a country larded with connectivity, mobile or otherwise. Figures from ITU show that two years ago, mobile penetration was trumping that of fixed in Uganda - and, according to Vodafone, the country's mobile phone penetration stands at four per cent. Yet 80 per cent of people in the country use mobiles, precisely through schemes like this. Mobiles are often bought privately and then put at the disposal of a community for profit.

Sente is not the only innovative service in the developing world. Relay text messaging can be seen in South Africa and Uganda - whereby texts sent to a village phone are delivered to an individual in the community by a runner.

The Grameen Foundation even finances the creation of these micro-businesses in places including Bangladesh, Rwanda and Uganda, helping entrepreneurs to buy mobiles and set up village phones.

As innovations go, these services put mobile TV in the shade.

Each represents a simple, necessary idea sprung from the fertile mind of some user who wanted to do something with a mobile that their operator hadn't provided yet.

It's reassuring to know that people in developing countries do actually want this technology, rather than having it foisted upon them by outsider interests, as has been my fear with some initiatives focusing on such areas of the world - the **$100 laptop**, for example. Citizens are

even turning mobiles into part of their country's infrastructure, generating services to fill the gaps left by the local government. How cool is that?

It's also good to see that even when operators are charging too much for services, punters will find a way to get what they want - if they want it bad enough.

It's something that appears to have passed by some of the UK operators, which more than once have adopted a 'price first, ask questions later' strategy - 50p for a picture message? £2.99 for a mobile music download that costs 79p on a PC?

If consumers wanted mobile music downloads bad enough, they'd all be paying £2.99 for them. If consumers really wanted mobile TV, they'd be happy to stump up £8 per month for it. The fact that the Virgin Mobile is giving its pioneering service away for free should tell us - and them - a great deal.

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