



The mobile web: Why the future really is on the small screen

Posted by *matt* on [April 05, 2008](#)

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According to a report on [Reuters last year](#), world wide mobile phone subscriptions reached 3.3-billion users or half the world's population. Compare this to television usage (about 1,5-billion users) or desktop internet usage (about 1,1-billion users), and it is not hard to see why there is so much excitement about the potential of the mobile web.

In Japan more than 70% of internet access is via mobile phones as opposed to desktop internet access. Japan's present is the rest of the world's future – and we will see the same trends emerge here and elsewhere. The mobile phone is poised to be a key medium on which publishers will deliver content and on which advertisers will reach consumers.

Internet in this country has always been hamstrung by cost factors. Buying a computer is not a cheap exercise and broadband is expensive. It's probably why the internet is still regarded as somewhat of a niche medium with around 4,5-million monthly local users visiting local sites.

Four-and-a-half million is nothing to sniff at. It is double the size of the Irish online market and perhaps comparable in size to Norway and other European countries. It's an attractive proposition to advertisers because it reaches people in the country with buying power and disposable income. However we can't escape the fact that it is still way below our potential, because it represents less than 10% penetration in our country of 50-million people.

Enter the mobile web. Internet access via mobile phones has the potential to be a truly mass online medium, cutting through the demographic constraints of desktop web access. We are already starting to see this trend in the developing world: last year one of the world's biggest online news players, the BBC, [reported](#) that 61% of its international WAP user came from Nigeria and 19% from South Africa.

With relatively high mobile phone penetration rates in many developed and developing world countries, it is not hard to see that the mobile phone is poised to be the mass media device of the future.

It's a trend that goes beyond mobile phones, but applies to all digital devices. In the future a digital device that is not networked or connected via the internet will be a strange thing. All digital devices will be connected to the internet and networked to each other for a feature-rich experience. It will be the mobile phone that is the driver of this trend.

The main factors driving web access on mobile phones are:

1. It's getting easier to access the net via handsets. In the past it was difficult, but many phones arrive from their service providers with internet settings preloaded and dedicated buttons pushing users to the mobile web.
2. The entry level features for phones are rising all the time. High resolution, colour screens conducive to browsing are now standard.
3. The mobile web is starting to expand as publishers realise the importance of it... most serious online players now have mobile-optimised versions of their sites.
4. We're a society on the move and it is simply convenient to access the web on your phone to either email, get the latest news, or hop onto a mobile social or business networking site.
5. Ironically, South Africa's bundled mobile data rates are among the cheapest in the world. Compare this to general internet access, which is among the world's most expensive. Internet access via mobile phones and everywhere is generally getting cheaper.
6. We are an early adopter nation, as witnessed by the fact that we were at one stage the sixth biggest country on Facebook and number 11 in the world for internet usage in the late 90s. We hit saturation point early and our position drops, but this is unlikely to happen in the mobile context.
7. Expensive internet perhaps has paradoxically caused people to use their phones to get cheaper net access.
8. The social networking revolution and location-based services are particularly suitable for the mobile device, and this is driving usage. It's clear that South Africans are crazy about social networking.

Mobile advertising

Mobile advertising is still in its infancy, but is set to grow rapidly in pace with the growth of the mobile web. If you consider its potential reach, it's going to be a key advertising medium of the future, easily surpassing traditional online advertising. As a sign of its growing acceptance, last year the US-based Mobile Marketing Association released guidelines for mobile banner and text advertising.

The big guns are pouring resources into mobile. Google has launched its mobile version of its contextual search advertising product, Ad Words, featuring "call me" links instead of "click here" links. Recently, the search engine behemoth took a big bet on mobile especially with the release of its Android OS. Here in South Africa, new local Google head Stafford Masie announced last year at an informal briefing of top industry players that Google would be making a "big mobile play" in the country. That's not surprising on a continent that has more mobile users than fixed-line telephone users.

A few weeks ago, [Double Click](#) launched their mobile advertising server, DART Mobile, in Johannesburg. Recently [Admob](#), purportedly the biggest mobile network advertising provider in the world, dropped into the country from the US. They were here to service their market in South Africa, which they say is one of their biggest.

South Africans are accessing mobile web services like there is no tomorrow. The Admob execs said that South Africa was their third biggest market after the US and India. Admob reports that young South Africans are accessing mobile social network sites in their droves. It's not hard to believe with the success that the online chat service MXIT has had.

The beauty of mobile advertising is that it is achieving high click through rates — of about 10 times more than that of traditional web online advertising.

Mobile sites tend to be simple and uncluttered with relatively few choices on the small screen, so a mobile advert usually looks good and stands out on the small screen.

Advertisers are still working out their mobile strategies, and there will be a period of trial-and-error to discover what works and what doesn't on the mobile web. One thing is clear however, the mobile phone is set to be a key content and advertising medium of the future.

Adapted from a piece I wrote for [Vodacom's](#) mobile division newsletter

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• Author

Matthew Buckland is a web entrepreneur. He is the GM of [Mail & Guardian Online](#) and co-founder of blog aggregator [amatomu.com](#) and group blog, [Thought Leader](#). One of his proudest moments was