PCWorld

Searching where Google can't

Ken Banks, IDG News

We read a lot about the delivery, and popularity, of SMS services such as market prices, health advice and job alerts in developing countries, information there is clearly a need for. Only last week Grameen's AppLab initiative, in conjunction with Google and MTN, launched a suite of SMS services in Uganda. These are the services you'll get to hear most about when you search the web, trawl the blogosphere and attend various conferences on the subject. It all seems pretty sewn up on the content side - I mean, what else could people earning a few dollars a day (at most) possibly want?

I remember my days back in Nigeria, where I worked for the best part of 2002 at a primate sanctuary in Calabar. The mobile phone networks weren't quite operational yet - there was sometimes a signal and sometimes it worked - but the number of internet cafes was on the rise. I remember going in during the evenings, usually to find people generally doing one of four things - entering competitions to win cars or holidays, looking at females (and males) in varying degrees of undress, trying to find a partner on a dating site, or sending and receiving email (which was perhaps, in some cases, related to one of the first three activities). Clearly, this wasn't the only use of the internet in Calabar, but nevertheless it interested me to see what people did online once you gave them the opportunity to get there. Let's put it this way, few people were doing their homework, looking up university education options, checking the price of matoke or learning how to stay fit and healthy.

A couple of years ago during my time at Stanford University, I met a remarkable person by the name of Rose Shuman, a young entrepreneur living in Berkeley, California. With a background working in developing countries and a Masters in International Development from Brown University, Rose had developed a clever 'intercom' style box which, when placed in a rural location, allowed people access to the information they sought in a slightly unusual, but innovative manner. It was a 'one-step-removed' type of internet access.

It works like this. A villager presses a call button on a physical intercom device, located in their village, which connects them to a trained operator in a nearby town who's sitting in front of a computer attached to the Internet. A question is asked. While the questioner holds, the operator looks up the answer on the Internet and reads it back. All questions and answers are logged. For the villager there is no keyboard to deal with. No complex technology. No literacy issues. And during early trials at least, no cost. Put simply, Question Box - as it's called - provides immediate, relevant information to people using their preferred mode of communication - speaking and listening. I thought it was great and offered to help.

When I first met Rose she was trialing her first Question Box, which had been placed in Phoolpur village in Greater Noida, close to New Delhi, in September 2007. These early prototypes used landlines to connect the Box to the operator, and this has proved to be the weakest link in the technology chain. A reliance on landlines also severely restricts the location where a Box can be placed. It was clear she had a fixed-line problem waiting for a mobile solution – expect to see these rolling out soon.

Since I met Rose in 2007, a lot has happened. A number of shrewd appointments have seen African technology gurus such as Jon Gosier, of Appfrica fame, brought on board. This week Jon launched a very interesting Question Box-related website, "World Wants to Know", which displays the questions being asked in real time. As Jon himself put it, it's allowing "searching where Google can't".

Because many users are, to all intents and purposes, off-grid, some of the data Question Box has been collecting is priceless. When you allow rural people in developing countries to ask any question they like, what do they ask? What's important to them? Does it follow our health information model, or market prices idea, or an anticipated need for paid employment? Rose, Jon and the team continue to work through the data, but I can tell you that the results are not only cool, they're fascinating.

Sure, there are a few of the more likely suspects in there - people asking for exam results, health questions, enquires about land rights and food commodity prices. But there was also a demand for all sorts of other types of data, much of which I'd never have anticipated. Keep an eye on the Question Box website for more.

All of this leads us to a wider, more fundamental issue. Often when we plan and build mobile solutions for developing (or emerging) markets, we forget, neglect or are just plain unsure how to ask the users what it is that they want. The irony might be that, here at least, Question Box might end up being the answer we're looking for.

Ken Banks, founder of kiwanja.net, devotes himself to the application of mobile technology for positive social and environmental change in the developing world, and has spent the last 15 years working on projects in Africa. Recently, his research resulted in the development of FrontlineSMS, a field communication system designed to empower grassroots non-profit organisations. Ken graduated from Sussex University with honours in Social Anthropology with Development Studies and is currently working on a number of mobile projects funded by the Hewlett Foundation. Ken was awarded a Reuters Digital Vision Fellowship in 2006, and named a Pop!Tech Social Innovation Fellow in 2008. Further details of Ken's wider work are available on his website at www.kiwanja.net