

## The only way to be social

Can mobile content not only take off in the developing world - but even prove more 'sticky' there?

It's a question that TelecomsVision will be asking a number of industry players this year.

However, if actions speak louder than words, BuzzCity, a developer of global wireless communities and consumer services, may at least be boosting the 'yes' camp with myGamma, an international wireless networking community with paid membership. Among its target audience is the 'unwired' - users from developing countries who experience the internet for the first time on mobile.

This audience is mainly made up, says KF Lai, CEO of BuzzCity, of what he calls "middle and lower-middle class subscribers" - and it's not a small one. He cites South Africa, as an example. In this country of 40 million people, he says, the fixed internet penetration is only five or six million. However, there are about 35 million mobile users - and ten million of them can get on the mobile internet.

Part of the opportunity, of course, is that the developing world can get its hands on internet-enabled phones much more cheaply than it used to but, says Lai, "the second factor is that the cost of getting mobile internet is very cheap...some of these developing countries lead the way in having a flat rate."

This may be in part because developing world competition can be fairly tough: if new entrants see an opportunity, there's often little choice for the incumbents but to follow that lead.

In the developed world BuzzCity's service is targeted at blue collar and lower-income subscribers, in part because these users, like subscribers in the developing world, may not be able to afford PCs and broadband. Thus their attitudes are "not coloured by previous experience of fixed", as Lai puts it. The point, as mentioned elsewhere in this issue, is that most high-end consumers have a

choice for internet access, and they are unlikely to choose the mobile phone. In countries or situations where only the mobile phone offers internet access, the question is irrelevant and the audience, in all likelihood, is much more willing to grapple with a mobile phone's UI if it's the main source of internet access - especially if, like the fixed version, there's a chance of making new friends through social networking.

Which is what mygamma.com offers. It's basically a portal through which is enabled, as Lai puts it, "group messaging, blogs, upload, games...buying virtual items to give each other". There's also a testimonial feature. "They write testimonials about each other," he says, adding: "Girls want to exchange testimonials and have sometimes about 7,000! That's how they work to improve their standing."

Put simply, rather like fixed social networking there's a strong emphasis on vanity, friendship and companionship, but adapted to mobile because that's often the only source of internet access.

As for how this service makes money, the term 'paid membership' is a little misleading. Demand is now so high that entrance fees have largely been dropped. Advertising does the main job of paying for the service. This usually involves companies in the mobile internet business but, says Lai, a growing number of advertisers are from elsewhere. "In places like South Africa we have banks, financial services, cosmetics," he says. "Bricks and mortar companies are beginning to coming in too." To an extent, he suggests, this is because they have to follow their desired audience - and if that audience is exploring non-traditional media, so must they.

It's too early for euphoria, however. It took a while for the fixed internet to establish itself as an advertising outlet and mobile internet is still working on attracting advertising. Nevertheless, Lai welcomes developments like the MMA's standardisation of banner advertising.

It's predictable perhaps that BuzzCity is positive about the potential of mobile social networking aimed at the arguably less well-off. However, its own growth figures, not to mention a GSM Asia Mobile awards win for Best Mobile Social Networking Service do help to back its claims. But it is end users and advertisers that matter in the long run - as both BuzzCity and a growing number of competitors are aware.