

A six-year-old debate: Internet versus non-Internet marketing

 By [Allison Ross](#)

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It's been six years since I started my business with a bee in my bonnet and brazenly expressed my views on Bizcommunity. I found nothing more annoying than web designers and Internet marketers telling SMME owners they **MUST** have websites, search engine optimisation and social media profiles in order to succeed.

My take was that with only 10% of the SA population having access to the Internet, a business could very easily build a sustainable business around an "offline" market without the need for a website or any online marketing tools.

Of course, the online marketing community met these views with disdain! The Internet was the way of the future and SMME owners needed to get with the programme or die.

But what has the past six years shown? Is either view right or wrong?

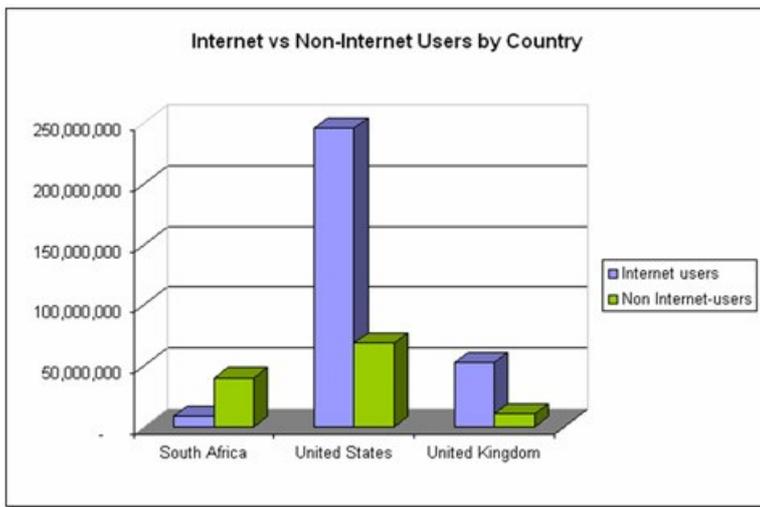
According to the latest Internet statistics, the number of users in South Africa has grown from a modest 2.4 million in December 2000 to an impressive 8.5 million in June 2012.

What does this mean for South African business owners?

While the 254% in usage growth can certainly take all naysayers to task - the Internet is here to stay! - perhaps it's worth considering the big picture before plunging head first into an online-only venture.

So what does the big picture say?

If you look closely at the chart, you'll see South Africa is still in its infancy stage with 8.5 million of the 49 million South Africans online, i.e. 17.4%.



Adapted from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

However, in the USA, 78.1% of the population are Internet users...245 million people! The UK has 52.7 million users online, which is 83.6% of its population.

You may have to think twice...

Does this mean that you should abandon all your online marketing efforts? Definitely not! With proper planning and clever use of resources you can certainly be a contender in the online world.

But it also means that you may have to think twice before putting all your eggs into one cyber basket. Does it make sense to ignore the 40.3 million South Africans who are not Internet users? Probably not.

While you certainly won't reach the entire SA market - especially not on an SMME's marketing budget - the key lies in finding your niche and determining whether they use online, offline, or a combination of both methods to search for and buy what you sell.

And PLEASE proceed carefully when following tips and trends based on International online markets. The Internet is clearly the way of the future and eventually we'll get there, but for now you may be better served by understanding the South African market.

Has the debate been settled?

MUST you have a website, search engine optimisation and social media profiles in order to succeed?

My opinion is that in some cases, having a strong online presence may carry less weight than you may expect, especially as a majority of the South African population doesn't use the Internet.

For example, informative sales brochures may clinch the deal at meetings and events where the target market prefers one-on-one meetings to email and online presentations.

Having a website even in this case certainly won't harm your business if your product also appeals to those who prefer online media. But what if only 1 in every 10 customers prefer online to offline media or use Google to find you? How much of your marketing budget, if any, would you then spend on an online presence? This question is worth considering, isn't it?

The bottom line is that there is no one-size-fits-all when planning your marketing strategy and no general right or wrong view. What works for some businesses may not work for others so it's up to you to determine the best fit for your budget. And it all comes down to knowing exactly who your target market is and what media they prefer.

Still, it would be interesting to hear what the Internet marketing community has to say...

ABOUT ALLISON ROSS

Allison Ross is the owner of Allison Ross Consulting (www.allisonross.co.za), a business aimed at making marketing easy to access, understand and apply. As an entrepreneur in South Africa, she understands first-hand the challenges we face when making the transition from entrepreneur to business owner.

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