South African social network mobile app proves successful in Africa

The South African mobile social network, 2go, offers African users a cheap, easy way to chat and socialise using their mobile phones. The app is successful in the Nigerian market, with reportedly 9 million active users, Kenya and South Africa.

Peter Lockhart

The company is able to deliver that experience across many different devices.

"Building mobile technology for an African market is tough," says director, Peter Lockhart. "Data and SMS are expensive and our users are price sensitive and savvy. That means we have to deliver an application that uses the absolute minimum of system resources and bandwidth. Our response has been to develop proprietary communications protocols and compression algorithms that minimise the app's data usage."

The company's team has also cracked the technical challenge of producing an app that works equally well on all of the many feature phones that still dominate the African market. "It's much harder to develop for feature phones than for smartphones, partly because there is such a variety of platforms and operating systems. The company's technical knowledge also extends its ability to scale the back-end in a very resource efficient manner."

Viral spread

The fact that it works well on many handsets has been critical to the viral spread of the app. "feature phones aren't going away any time soon. Projections from Informa indicate that non-smart phones will still comprise 85% of the African handset market in 2015."

The company has resisted the temptation to bloat its app with added features. "Our users log in and out quickly, several

times a day - they want things to be quick and simple. We've thought through every menu item; every pixel is there because it serves a purpose."

Alongside this technical focus, the company has also remained alert and sensitive to the needs of its users. "Our target market is not some kind of generic 'Africa'. We ask what country are they in, what region, what city? The app took off in Nigeria, when we noticed that our users wanted to be able to chat within their university communities. So we did the research and created a chat room for each university in the country."

The company also actively solicits and follows up on suggestions from its users. "People want to be asked for their opinion. Many of our users are starved for entertainment and engagement; eg 31% of our Nigerian users tell us they do not watch television, but 66% of them spend two or more hours on their phones each day. It's a very sociable society and the app supports that sociability."

The insights gained in Nigeria have fed back into the South African market, where the app has 1.5 million active users and counting. The app also provides gateways to other popular social networks such as GTalk, MXit and Facebook. "I use the app to chat to friends on Facebook and they have no idea. Our whole mission is to make chat easy, cheap and painless, no matter what device you're using," he concludes.

For more, go to www.2go.im.

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