FrontlineSMS brings a free, innovative solution to African broadcasters

By Russell Southwood

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LONDON, UK: As TV and radio broadcast markets intensify across several liberalized African countries, broadcasters need to find solutions to create more interactive with their audiences and build loyalty among them. SMS is one of those.

There are a few SMS management software available out there but FrontlineSMS, a rather discreet solution provider has already been in the front line to support several African broadcasters. Sylvain Beletre, senior analyst, Balacing Act talked to Amy O'Donnell, project manager at FrontlineSMS on how SMS can be a very powerful media tool.

Looking at recent audience surveys across the African market, it is obvious that local audience want local content. Indeed, radio and TV operators have responded by increasingly shifting from a one-way broadcast to media that reach audiences by integrating interaction with listeners into programming.

But the lack of communication with the audience and the lack of finances are often major barriers for broadcast organisations working in African countries. Not knowing exactly what people want to watch and listen and not being able to check facts on the field, broadcasters have to find alternative solutions to make their job easier if they want to avoid being eaten up by more powerful competitors. And if broadcasters do not know their audience's program needs, they lose market share together with potential advertisers' revenues.

FrontlineSMS is a text messaging system marketed with these problems in mind. By leveraging basic tools already available to most broadcasters and their audiences - computers and mobile phones - FrontlineSMS enables instantaneous two-way communication on a large scale. As parts of its numerous applications, it can facilitate dynamic conversations between radio listeners or TV watchers and broadcasters - whether it is in Africa or elsewhere. It's easy to implement, simple to operate, and best of all, the software is free; you just pay for the messages you send in the normal way.

A common application is for broadcasters to invite listeners to send text messages in response to questions posed on the programme, submit direct concerns, and share commentary. Experience has proved that using incentives is not mandatory if questions are of real importance to the audience. However, incentives to send SMS could include entering a draw, specific rewards, entries to an event or free mobile minutes.

If users need help, the company provides telephone and workshop support. In one hour, any computer literate person can find out how to use this piece of software. If it sounds too complicated or if in-house human resources are not available to operate the solution, the organisation can also provide full customised support on a paid basis - this is how they generate part of their revenues.

Radio represents the dominant media source for many African communities. The number of radio stations in Africa has increased massively over the past ten years, creating a very competitive segment. Several African radio stations are characterised with a strong focus on community and local development. FrontlineSMS:Radio has been developing software which assists community radio stations to interact dynamically with audiences.

FrontlineSMS:Radio is built on the core technology of FrontlineSMS, a freely downloadable, open source software which assists with the management of SMS using a computer and mobile phone or GSM modem. The software turns your laptop and your mobile phone into a powerful system for sending and receiving SMS messages. FrontlineSMS enables users to get SMS from large groups of people without requiring internet access. It is customisable and also supports citizen journalists with tools for digital news gathering.

As a radio station, the only thing you need is a phone number that you obtain from your local mobile operator, plugging in a mobile phone or GSM modem to a computer, and the piece of software.

The latest version also makes it easier to send auto-replies to incoming SMS, add data to contacts and create contact groups, run polls, monitor, and keep long-term records of conversations for data gathering and evaluation. Radio presenters carrying out poll activity can visualize at a glance incoming data from listeners, quickly understand the results, and incorporate such data into a live program.

The FrontlineSMS:Radio software (currently in trial) features a broadcast button enabling message tagging at a click of a button, and managing messages according to which radio shows the SMS content is more relevant. With radio station managers increasingly interested in accessing long-term information about their audiences, there's a great potential to engage listeners in a more targeted way by collecting data about listeners' gender, age, needs, consumption, audience's time or location for example.

In the field, such a solution can be used in various ways. For example in Zambia, Breeze FM radio uses FrontlineSMS to communicate with journalists. After gathering news tips received from the general public, the radio station organises the evidence, sends SMS to journalists who may be out in the field, encouraging them to verify the facts and report. FrontlineSMS has also been used in Niger and Chad.

In Chad, during youth radio show "Chabab Al Haye" (Youth Alive) people could ask questions and give comments, which helped others in the most remote regions to feel included in discussions about issues such as grievances, tolerance and livelihoods.

In Niger, during the pre-election period radio audiences could express their views about positions and candidates by responding to programs directly, through a toll-free SMS message line, which facilitated a more inclusive debate. Also, program producers were able to increase their responsiveness to listener preferences.

Another case comes from Better FM in Uganda where FrontlineSMS:Radio was installed in April 2011. The software enabled each radio presenter to have their own space to manage SMS relevant to them within the same system. Better FM hosts two shows allowing listeners to engage with their MPs in dialogues about public service delivery.

Other examples include raising awareness about medicine availability in African countries such as Uganda and Kenya, where pharmacies frequently run out of medication.

Mapping systems can also be a powerful tool for journalists who can use the SMS evidence collected from people and report the situation on the ground and to government agencies. By reporting on people's ability to access health and safety facilities, broadcasters can improve communities' lives using simple SMS technology in a professional way.

Using SMS require minimal financial and technical resources. It should definitely be part of the essential toolkit for most African broadcasters.

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