Beyond apps - Does your 2013 customer engagement strategy include mobile?

By Mongezi Mtati
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There has been an increase in interest and activity in web and mobile applications over the past year. In October/November 2012, there are three important conferences focused on this developing arena, including Demo Africa, Tech4Africa and Mobile Web Africa.

Growth of mobile and tech developments in Africa

October 2012, saw the launch of the first Demo Africa which dubs itself "The launchpad for emerging technology and trends". Demo conferences have been hosted all over the world, connecting start-ups with venture funding and leading to the launch of CRM applications such as Saleforce.

The Demo Africa start-up pitching process began with 500 start-ups from all over Africa submitting applications. They then shortlisted to 150 and the final Top 40 pitched to investors and other companies last week. I found it interesting that African start-ups and developers are moving beyond creating the next Facebook and are building mobile applications that engage consumers and brands.

Mobile Web Africa, a web and mobile conference, also hosts a BlackBerry sponsored mobile application development competition.

Changing perceptions

In another article, I covered trends and observations of what techies locally and internationally are working on. This year, I took that search a little further and found out from the founder of Tech4Africa, Gareth Knight, what changes they have noted in the South African and African tech and mobile landscape.
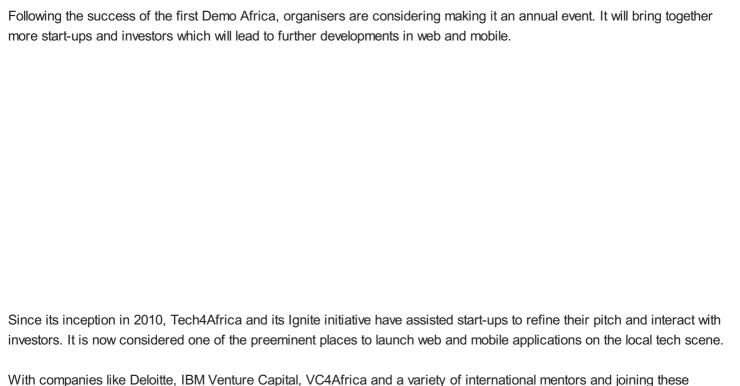
Knight is an internationally recognised thought leader in technology and an entrepreneur who built start-ups that were backed and acquired by international venture capital firms.

▦ *Looking back at the last two annual Tech4Africa conferences, are you finding that corporate South Africa is embracing technology more?*

Gareth Knight: We're seeing that more corporate companies have specific teams in place to deal with technology inside the enterprise - social media marketers, app developers etc. All of those parts have an appetite to understand the whole when it comes to winning customers, launching new services and building revenue. But that also has to come from the top and we're holding our first CEO/VIP Dinner at Tech4Africa to cater to exactly that - the need to put technology on the board room table, answer questions, debate opportunities and find partnerships.

In a comprehensive study released earlier in the year by World Wide Worx and Google South Africa, it was revealed that; cellular penetration is at 126% and further research by World Wide Worx proves individual penetration to be at 80% with 40-million South Africans using phones. The study goes on to say "10-million phones are sold in South Africa every year" and 50% of that is expected to be smartphones by 2013. The African continent is also known to be quick in the adoption and consumption of mobile technology. Organisations should be paying attention to what developers are working on.

Increased investor confidence

Following the success of the first Demo Africa, organisers are considering making it an annual event. It will bring together more start-ups and investors which will lead to further developments in web and mobile.

Since its inception in 2010, Tech4Africa and its Ignite initiative have assisted start-ups to refine their pitch and interact with investors. It is now considered one of the preeminent places to launch web and mobile applications on the local tech scene.

With companies like Deloitte, IBM Venture Capital, VC4Africa and a variety of international mentors and joining these initiatives - more robust applications are consistently being built.

Reasons to include mobile in your marketing mix

Specialists in the web and mobile spaces will tell you that the vast majority of your customers in Africa engage with your offering from a mobile device. I have also seen that most developers who build applications for the web focus most of their resources on mobile.

While creating a holistic offering for both the web and mobile environments is still significant, mobile takes centre stage among consumers. Of the 40 shortlisted applicants at Demo Africa, more than seven are built for mobile phones.

Corporate South Africa is investing more on in-house teams who build their mobile platforms and strategies, as noted by Gareth Knight. The growth of such teams will lead to more competitive strategy and robust applications, which in turn will leave the laggards far behind.

Join the conversation

To join the next Demo Africa and follow what happened, have a look on their website and follow their tweets on @DEMOAfrica.

Tech4Africa is a premier mobile, web and emerging technology conference, bringing global perspective to the African context. It kicks off on 31 October 2012 with a Developer and Hackathon. The day after, 1 November 2012, is the conference with speakers and start-up presentations. Visit their website and get latest tweets via @Tech4Africa.

Mobile Web Africa, is also fast becoming one of the most talked about events in the annual web and mobile calendar. This year, it takes place on 27th-29th November 2012 and they also host a mobile application competition. Their line-up of speakers includes Gustav Praekelt (MD of Praekelt Digital) and Ory Okolloh (Google's Policy Manager for sub-Saharan Africa and co-founder of Ushahidi). Check out their website for more information and follow @mwebafrica on Twitter for the latest updates.

At the beginning of the year, I foresaw increasing growth in mobile and as investors - both local and international - pay attention, we will see the growth of more industry specific niche applications. The IDC (Industrial Development Corporation) recently launched their Open Innovation initiative that aims to fund innovative ideas, which in my view will see more people

compete for the increasing funding opportunities. As you plan your marketing and advertising for 2013, it's worth following what happens at these gatherings and including mobile in your strategy.

What trends in web and mobile do you think will influence consumer engagement in 2013?

ABOUT MONGEZI MTATI

Mongezi Mtati founded WordStart to help companies generate buzz around their products and services among South African influencers. He is passionate about helping brands to connect the dots from social media, digital data and human interactions outside the web. Mtati is also digital analyst, a speaker and a contributor on some of South Africa's leading platforms.

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