

Africa is the mobile advertising world's sleeping giant

 By [Stephen Sandmann](#)

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Africans have innovated in the realm of mobile before, in mobile banking, for which we are globally renowned. To paraphrase David Sable, Global CEO of leading advertising agency Y&R, the Western world can learn a lot from Africa's mobile application of the latest technology in banking. I believe Africa's innovative spirit has largely been the result of necessity, to make up for a lack of traditional infrastructure amongst its consumers.

That being said, we need to find that sense of necessity for the general mobile advertising industry in Africa. When it comes to mobile advertising, Africa has arguably lagged behind its Western counterparts. This has largely been the result of a combination of factors, namely: A 'device technology gap' legacy that is still lingering (low-income individuals with 'basic' feature phones and the rich with 'advanced' smartphones), advertising industry complacency and the fact that many mobile phone users have been incorrectly bunched together as a single market (on the assumption that all Africans have feature phones with limited features).

Advertising agencies and their clients have been conservative and complacent when it comes to pushing what mobile tech they can apply to their campaigns. I argue that Africa has even more to offer the world in the form of forward-thinking mobile advertising.

Mobile - An underutilised marketing channel

In terms of capabilities, mobile phones have progressed in leaps and bounds in recent years. So today's SMS and USSD mechanics of current mobile campaigns can be seen as primitive in the context of some African markets.

A few years ago most feature phones in Africa lacked online browsers and related features. Well Opera Mini-powered feature phones and 'budget' smartphones have changed all of that. For example, feature phones have had Google search capabilities for some time now. Opera Mini's low mobile data usage and feature phone compatibility have resulted in its widespread use in Africa.



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African mobile users are more digital savvy than many think. For example, Google search is incredibly popular in many parts of Africa, together with sites like Facebook. With the right stimulus, a popular, reality TV show like Big Brother Africa for example, can result in a massive growth in Nigerian, Kenyan, Ghanaian and South African viewers interacting with the show's website throughout the series to find out the latest news. These viewers would access this website mostly via many millions of Google searches - Google is truly the primary gateway to the internet. These consumers are not 'backward' but more advanced in their mobile habits than generally thought to be.

The potential is truly massive

In 2015, with the growth in usage of smartphones and more advanced feature phones we have exceptional opportunities to be creative with mobile advertising. I've elaborated on Opera Mini as a mobile game changer but I should share more of my thoughts on another key player. I'm referring to harnessing a powerful phenomenon, Google and its technologies, in a creative and effective way. Google is a major innovator in mobile phone technology. This is not only due to their technological prowess but also to their unrivalled global footprint.

Earlier I referred to 'budget' smartphones - Tech Crunch shared some details about the 'sub-\$50' ('basic') Android-based MTN Steppa smartphone, which doesn't require a contract, are major catalysts for smartphone penetration in Africa. Google's Android mobile platform is the world's largest (Android has 1.4 billion '30 day active' devices in the world"

according to Google) and with it come Google's technologies such as mobile Google search and "OK Google" voice search to an audience of an unprecedented size.

Google's Android One smartphone (Infiniti Hot 2 mobile device) retails in Africa for around \$88 and has the latest Android software (read latest and greatest Android technology). This Android One-powered smartphone is available in Nigeria, Egypt, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, and Morocco as reported by PC World. This opens up massive potential for the exciting application of mobile technologies in mobile campaigns like never before. I'm explicitly not referring to mobile advertising media such as mobile banner ads and Facebook ads because I'm trying to make a point that we have moved beyond that now (not to take anything away from them and their continued success, creative potential and relevance).

On Device Research, the research company, has done some interesting African mobile research, which revealed promising results. They found that mobile penetration in South Africa is at 133%, which means that most South Africans have more than one mobile phone. South African smartphone penetration is at 47%. While Kenya's mobile penetration is 70% and their smartphone penetration is 31%. While Nigeria's mobile penetration is at 22%, with smartphone penetration at 29%.

Last but certainly not least, mobile data, which is of vital importance when it comes to mobile development, is becoming more affordable as time goes by, as discovered by On Device Research.

Mobile campaigns need not break the bank

It need not be expensive to execute such advancements in mobile advertising either. The clever usage of Google's technology in a campaign can be done cost-effectively. This is especially the case when you focus on using Google's mobile, organic search results as the backbone of your campaign. This type of Google search listings is free to make use of a marketing channel, unlike Google ads.

A recent African example of what I'm rambling on about

A South African mobile advertising campaign springs to mind, which I think ticked the effective and forward-thinking 'boxes' well. I'm referring to the use of Google's "OK Google" voice search technology in a mobile advertising campaign. It made use of mobile organic search (voice search makes use of mobile search) which resulted in a relatively low cost per lead for users to make use of voice search to access a website. Cost per click paid digital media (website banner ads, paid search ads and YouTube ads) is not a prerequisite for such a campaign to function properly. Watch [this video](#) for more information about this example of African mobile advertising.

This mobile campaign has performed exceptionally well and has been recognised for it locally too in 2015. The South African Assegai Awards is well-respected in South Africa, as a hat tip for agency work that is creative and effective. Award entries are scrutinized by their judges who are leading industry figures. The campaign I refer to was entered into these awards while it was in its infancy, having run for only two months. Regardless of that fact, it won a silver Assegai Award in its category.

Be inspired by Cannes and be brave too

African advertising agencies need to reflect on what exactly is creative mobile advertising, work that has well-executed elements of novelty and effectiveness. Client return on investment demands value, which are all the product of well-executed mobile campaigns.

Cannes and top, local advertising awards should inspire African agencies to create work that can compete at the highest global standard, and not just leave Western countries to compete amongst themselves. The Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity is arguably the world's most important source of advertising inspiration and the yardstick for advertising excellence. Memac Ogilvy Label Tunisia agency winning five Silver and two Bronze Lions in 2013 for their ['Mobilizing the 12th Man'](#) campaign is testament to this principle. This Tunisian-based agency's work is truly inspiring.

Clearly some African advertising agencies excel at groundbreaking work, which is a result of a robust, creative corporate culture and by the collaboration of cross-discipline individuals who don't put limits on their thinking. Calculated risk-taking, I feel is critical too, playing it safe results in SMS campaign after SMS campaign and nothing original.

David Sable also once noted that he loved the energy, motivation and innovation associated with Africa. We as Africans should live up to these truths about us. So, I humbly implore all African digital marketers to be brave by pitching fresh mobile ideas that are imaginative, scary and ROI driven. Let's fully wake up the sleeping giant that is Africa.

ABOUT STEPHEN SANDMANN

I have a keen interest in innovative, digital marketing-lead advertising and search marketing (SEO and paid search), which I've developed through my award-winning agency and corporate career at Ogilvy, Quirk (now Mrum), Vodacom and now a specialist digital marketing consultant at Sandmann Digital.

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