

Straight Talking – Mobile internet reality

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It's all about community

If you or your organisation are trying to connect with an audience - whether customers, prospects, suppliers or employees - and are using technology to offer each individual a personalised choice, perhaps you've got the wrong end of the stick.

Despite the apparent desire for individuality, most of us like to 'belong' somewhere with other like-minded folk - a community, department, club, interest group or network. We also tend to operate more effectively as part of a group or team.

Of course there is a need to personalise. After all, we all like to think our preferences are individual and we each have a different cocktail of networks that we participate in to some extent. This involvement and group relevance determines what aspects of personalisation each of us find most useful and valuable over a longer time, as much of the rest of what are seen as highly individual are often transient fads or fashion.

Technology can be a great leveller, opening up a selection of easily available choices. With the barriers of access and entry removed or at least significantly lowered, specialist topics can be served to their narrow interest group, which is part of the premise of Chris Anderson's book *The Long Tail*. But even popular topics or brands tend to attract a known, bounded group of returning adherents - Pepsi drinkers, fashionistas, CNN watchers, the MTV generation - creating a community of interest.

Take something that does support the long tail concept - the internet, where everyone can get information, communicate or trade with anyone or any organisation almost anywhere on the planet.

But even here, right from the outset, people subscribe to news groups, join chatrooms, belong to community networks, or have their shared favourite jumping-off point. Why have so many people followed the herd instinct into the

virtual world of Second Life? Before the cynics say it's because they haven't got a first life, it's to find a community or communities to belong to - something that is common not only to primates but also to many groups of mammals.

On the internet, much of the belonging starts with communities of interest where people subscribe to join a community and gain access. Those who sign up but don't actively participate in newsgroups are known as lurkers. Now the trendy phrases are 'user-generated content', blogging and web 2.0 - all of which are about no longer just lurking but participating, contributing and providing new material.

There are challenges with this - notably too much content to harvest and a difficulty in sorting wheat from chaff - but the peer review and selection in communities plays a part in keeping this under control.

With the advent of IPTV, using the internet to deliver television, even more channels of choice become possible.

Here too communities of interest are becoming important. One interesting trial being conducted by Alcatel in a semi-rural area of Belgium is using the capacity of IPTV to offer community channels. This is not just one for the region but potentially one for every club, association or even street.

There is one channel running in a care home where an 85-year-old creates footage that is 'narrowcast' to channel subscribers - his fellow residents - on the following day. It may not be mass-market but it is probably far more interesting to its viewers than any of the major channels - it is their community.

Mobile technology opens up new opportunities for building communities of interest since the mobile phone is one of the most carried personal items. For many it is their lifeline, their remote control, their link to their community of friends, family and contacts.

Initially just a way to make calls, the mobile has become a way to share messages among a 'gang', 'tribe' or 'team' - with SMS for teen and 20s and BlackBerry emails for the too-old-to-text but too-young-to-write execs. Now as the handsets are becoming smarter, with brighter, larger colour screens and access to faster data networks, the talk is of a 'mobile internet'.

Much of the discussion centres on technology - browsers, platforms, screen size - assuming the value comes from taking a desktop experience and shrinking it to a pocket-sized device. The thinking appears to be that the communities of interest on the fixed internet will translate directly to a mobile experience. This misses the point.

One day perhaps, technology - projection or 'head up' displays, voice-driven browsers or smart paper - may find a way of making a rich media desktop experience pocket-able but the current mobile state of the art can do something far more important. It can extend interactive reach to wherever is relevant to the individual.

For businesses which are seeking to develop and exploit communities of interest - and let's face it, all are in one way or another, with customers, employees, patients, readership or consumers - this provides a mechanism to extend the relationship.

This does not require the high definition, high-quality multimedia that technologists love but the high-touch, value-driven interaction preferred by sales and marketing departments. Pushed mobile adverts trying to generate demand are unlikely to succeed, as the mobile user, under time and screen space constraints, requires relevant content or services that add value, tailored specifically to their immediate need.

Even the latest smart phones are still primarily centred around personal communication, so a significant focus must be on how that value translates into social or business interaction - and how it supports the user's communities of interest.

It should be remembered that the technologists who provided SMS - a very basic technology which was originally designed for network engineers to communicate - did not imagine it

would be used for supporting widespread social communication.

Social change lags technological changes but when it occurs the consequences are far more significant and lead to a redefinition of the use of technology, often well away from what the engineers originally intended. The technology offers more individual choice but the herd instinct draws us together - a herd where everyone is also part of their own 'long tail'.

For a perspective on the opportunities offered by the emerging mobile channel, download Quocirca's free report Reach, Relevance and Relationship from the Quocirca website.

About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

Quocirca works with global and local providers of ITC products and services to help them deliver on the promise that ITC holds for business. Quocirca's clients include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM, Dell, T-Mobile, Vodafone, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

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