

Undersea cables speed adoption of internet

The African continent has a total population of a billion people and 500 000 of these are cellphone users, says Deon Liebenberg, regional director for sub-Saharan Africa at BlackBerry phone manufacturer Research in Motion (RIM).

"About 65% of all mobile users in Africa live in seven of 53 countries on the continent."

He says these are the more technologically advanced countries in northern Africa like Egypt, Algeria and Morocco, that have had mobile communication and been connected to undersea cables for some time.

"The landing of the new cables on the east and west coasts of Africa will speed up the adoption of fixed and mobile internet across the continent."

Right now there are only 110 million internet users in Africa, including SA, and operators and service providers are working hard to make mobile internet available to more people.

Liebenberg says the most popular website among mobile subscribers is Facebook, followed by Google and then Wikipedia. This is quite different to PC and laptop users, whose number one favourite website is Twitter, followed by Facebook and then Google.

He says mobile internet users want simplified instant messaging and social networking capabilities, RSS feeds, fast, rich web browsing, and advanced multimedia capabilities. They want a good visual experience and to be able to move fluidly from one icon to another.

For example, a user might want to switch quickly from capturing an incident on video with the camera to browsing YouTube to see if something similar has already been uploaded, and then switch back to the camera.

"We have taken requirements like this into consideration with our latest phone models," says Liebenberg.

He says more than a million mobile applications a day are being downloaded from BlackBerry App World.

"Our research shows that 99% of all applications downloaded are discarded, or users stop using them after the first four weeks."

This is an indication that users tend to go back to the applications that suit their lifestyle best, he says.

For example, those who travel a lot want to be able to check their flight times, and journalists would tend to use Twitter and subscribe to news feeds to keep up to date on news events worldwide.

"These are examples of super applications that support users' lifestyles by delivering just-in-time data to them when they need it," says Liebenberg.

Super applications integrate with each other, allowing users to navigate from one to another.

He says in the US users can link their smartphone to a pay TV decoder and stream recordings of their

favourite TV programmes to it and watch them while on the move and the same will eventually happen in the country.

The major challenge for cellphone manufacturers is to introduce new features without changing the user experience to the extent that the device is complex to use, says Liebenberg

In addition, as cellphones become faster, as they offer more functionality, and as the screens become brighter, this will put a strain on battery life.

"We need to look for ways of extending battery life to accommodate the new functionality and longer periods of use," he says.

Source: Business Day

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