

Creative thinking key to app development

By [Prins Mhlanga](#)

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There are now a third more cellphones than people in South Africa and with the country ranked at an impressive number six in the world of mobile web usage, it's useful to reflect on where it all started.

South African innovation



Prins Mhlanga

Many of us are familiar with the often-quoted statistic that says the country's cellular networks in 1994 were operating according to a business model that called for 250,000 subscribers within ten years. This was based on South Africa's single car phone network never having more than 3,000 subscribers at any one time. The newly-installed cellular movers and shakers in 1994 had never envisaged that they would soon be subsidising mobile phones which would see subscriber uptake rocket. The runaway success story that became prepaid cellular hadn't yet been conceptualised.

It's interesting how trendsetting decision-makers arrive at their decisions. I briefly mention prepaid cellular above. That South African-perfected innovation has got to be at least among the top five game-changing mobile innovations. Also right up there, and possibly top of the pops, is the humble Short Message Service (SMS) text message.

160 characters

Have you ever wondered why there are 160 characters in an SMS? Why not round it down to 150 or take the total upwards to a more useable 200 characters? The answer lies with an office-bearer of the industry lobbying group, the Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA).

Back in 1985, Friedhelm Hillebrand was tasked by the GSMA with coming up with the amount of characters a text message could contain. Friedhelm sat and typed out random sentences to see what the average number of characters was. He found that the average length of a sentence or phrase was about 160 characters.

Unfortunately, his colleagues were less than impressed with his unscientific approach so he backed up his observations by analysing the length of dozens of postcard messages. He found that their average length was 150 characters so he was being to consumers by giving them an extra 10 characters to play with! He also analyzed the length of Telex messages and, once again, 150 to 160 characters was the average, even though one could potentially use many more characters in an old-style Telex. The 160 character length limit was soon adopted by the GSMA.



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The message

With Whatsapp, easy typing functionality on smartphones and the networks' ability to coherently link text messages together, Hillebrand's unilateral decision doesn't matter too much anymore. However, who remembers the early days of texting when one became increasingly frustrated as you couldn't find any more characters to delete and your cellphone still refused to send the message?

If there's a message here, it's that the app developers of 2015 should endeavour to somehow build flexible scalability into their creations and always be mindful of some future application that they may never have considered. Developing creative thinking abilities that fully appreciate how tomorrow might look, as well as honing technical skills, should be the twin goals of any app development firm.

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