

Connectivity for development

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When the first spate of xenophobic attacks hit last year, Google South Africa found out that 89 percent of South Africans searching online for information, didn't know how to spell xenophobia.

"And it was about 75 percent of worldwide users who spelt xenophobia incorrectly," said Stafford Masie, country manager for Google South Africa.

Google's market share of online search (ranging in the 90 percent region) has enabled the organisation to chart even arbitrary search trends, giving them a deep view of internet users.

"Things that happen offline drive people online," said Masie, speaking at a Distinguished Lecture in October last year.

Google's South African presence is fairly young and the company has rooted here for about a year.

"One of the things we're doing in South Africa is not to build the Google model, but to build an African model for Google. Our objective is to get an understanding of it here," he said.

They plan on localizing Google products and we may eventually see maps.google.co.za, youtube.co.za and blogger.co.za.

"We want to participate, empower and get involved in what we fundamentally believe, 'Connectivity'," he said.

Masie sees connectivity as a socio-economic issue. "I grew up in Johannesburg South and the reason I didn't fall prey to social norms like gangsterism was because I left the country to study. And the only difference between me and those that stayed behind is exposure; meeting other people and getting a broader perspective. This is what technology is able to do; provide that exposure."

He said they found a direct correlation between internet connectivity and broadband penetration and numerous factors. "The connectivity was linked to the maturity of that society, the competitiveness of that nation and GDP growth."

Masie has written papers on how pervasive broadband access should not be a privilege but a human right. "And it should not just be pervasive, it should be free."

"Why wasn't something like Skype developed in South Africa. Is it because we're not capable? No, it's because we're just not connected enough. The more people you connect, the more things will spawn" he said.

Google South Africa is working actively towards this vision, according to Masie.

“We’ve just announced a \$4.7 billion project that will launch low orbit satellites to provide free satellite broadband access to inner Africa. We understand that the coasts will be sorted out by the cable connections, the edges of the continent are fine but it’s a challenge to connect inward. We want to specifically target broadband penetration within the mid of Africa.”

Masie acknowledged that South Africa was measured as being one of the top three most expensive countries in terms of telecommunication costs.

“However, our vision is that in the next 18 months, we’re going to go from one of the top three most expensive to the one of the cheapest places in the world for connectivity. We believe that.”

There are almost five million South Africans connected to the internet, with one million of that segment making use of broadband.

Google wants to see that ten to 15 million South Africans are using broadband come 2011/2012.

It’s not just about broadband. “Nothing has penetrated society as deeply as the mobile phone. By 2011 there’ll be 3.4 billion mobile phones additional to what there is today,” said Masie who believes that mobile is where it’s at.

“There are more mobile phones than our TVs, credit cards and cars combined in the world. We’re going to launch the Google phone in Q1 this year – that phone will have more features than the iphone. Our objective with that phone is simple; we want to put iphone type capabilities in every single human being’s hand.”

Google statistics on mobile phone use in South Africa showed that one in six Google searches in the country happened on a mobile phone. This is the highest ratio of Google search on a mobile in the world.

“78 percent of people that have owned mobile phones in South Africa, don’t have PCs. More than 85 of that number will never own a pc in their lifetime. The computational device they then come into contact with is the mobile phone. We’ve now developed universal search for mobile devices, going from just providing text links to maps and news items,” Masie said.

For a company that’s just about the world’s biggest brand, Masie said their business model is profoundly simple, yet profoundly successful.

“Google’s model around ‘free’ is astounding. So how do we make money? We’re not in the advertising game. We advertise for users, and that’s no longer advertising,” he said.

“We’re built on two major principles; end-user generated content and moments of relevance. There are also four fundamental principles anyone with an online presence should adhere to; speed, verbosity, relevance and simplicity. If you build a business, build it like Google.”

Masie presented an empowerment model that linked to moments of relevance, by recounting how he went shopping for a jungle gym for his kids.

“I met a guy in west Pretoria who makes the best jungle gyms. If a nuke fell in downtown Sandton, those things would still be standing. He was turning over about R10k-20k per month. We raised R8000 with our employees and created an online Google ad campaign for him. We went to the DTI and asked them if they could use some of the subsidisation money they give to exporters who fly overseas for tradeshows and provide free shipping for this guy’s jungle gyms. They agreed. We targeted the east coast of the US and when people in Connecticut, Maine or Florida were searching for outdoor toys etc. what would pop up would be an ad for genuine, handmade best quality South African jungle gyms. People were clicking through to a simple landing page with a call to action. His turnover was R1.4 million for the whole of 2008. He’s no longer campaigning online because he can only make so many jungle gyms. Just imagine what we could do for every small to medium business in the country and that’s my objective, to get everyone online.”