

The Future of Branded Education and the Opportunity for Brands

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The device in everyone's pocket may be the key to improving the lives for millions across the globe through learning and education. Dan Chapman at MediaCom MENA looks at how mobile ed works and the evolving opportunity for brands.

There are now nearly as many mobile devices in use – six billion – as there are people on the planet. Surprised? You shouldn't be. What's also not surprising is that 68 percent of the growth in mobile usage is coming from developing and emerging markets. In Africa, for example, more people will have mobiles than electricity in less than two years. Mobile subscriptions in many Arab states, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are at over 100 percent penetration (meaning there are more mobile subscriptions than citizens). Driving

this surge is the reduced cost of mobile equipment, lower tariffs and a lack of fixed line infrastructure. Many believe that mobile connectivity will become the very foundation of education in markets around the world, such as the Middle East and Africa (MEA). If literacy is a proxy for the spread of education, consider these statistics: 84 percent of individuals around the world are considered “literate” – that is, those over the age of 15 who can read and write. In the United States, the literacy rate is 99 percent. Juxtapose this with the Arab states, where literacy sits at 75 percent and, in Sub-Saharan Africa, just 63 percent. And yet, 50 percent of the population in Saudi Arabia is under the age of 25, and there are 200 million youths between the ages of 15-24 across Africa.

One reason for these abysmal statistics is that nearly 50 percent of the MEA population lives in rural areas, with no access to education, and significant societal pressure to begin working. On average, children in MEA leave school at 13.4 years of age, the youngest age anywhere around the world.

Power of mobile

The power of mobile to make a difference is clear from the “Arab Spring,” when millions of protestors used their humble devices to turn local uprisings into a movement. Mobile phones enabled participants to provide a “you are here” audio and visual experience to people around the world via social media, telephony and SMS. This provided everyone – the activists, as well as the millions who watched from near and far – with instantaneous reports and running accounts of events as they occurred. Some have called the Arab Spring the largest learning phenomenon the world has ever seen. What’s also apparent is that the mobile phone is the perfect publishing tool. Its ability to link consumers to the education process at any time of the day or night makes it an excellent platform to communicate key messages on a wide range of issues, creating a more empowered populace.

The mobile opportunity

Mobile devices have been used in MEA for various educational and health-related initiatives, all with positive outcomes. Here are several examples:

The Wired Mothers project in Zanzibar connected pregnant and new mothers with primary healthcare units in an effort to reduce high infant and maternal mortality. The participants received SMS reminders for routine healthcare appointments, and allowed them to contact primary healthcare providers at any time if problems arose. The program transformed attitudes in a country where having a baby was described as “just a lucky gamble,” and gave expectant mothers hope and confidence. In conflict-ridden Somalia, mobile access offers vivid evidence of the effects of civil war on ordinary people. Al Jazeera’s “Somalia Speaks” project enabled Somalians to talk about the personal impact of war through crowdsourcing and SMS. Over the course of just a few days, more than 4,000 text messages were sent. The resulting posts offer a glimpse into the suffering of people caught in the middle of a civil war. The BBC was applauded for the mobile English language course it offered in Bangladesh. Over 2.3 million subscribers received English phrases by SMS, which they could then practice in the workplace. Research indicates that speaking and understanding even a few simple English expressions often leads to salary hikes of up to 200 percent in this part of the world.

CocoaLink is a widely-used mobile service that connects 15 communities in western Ghana, delivering practical tips on farming practices, farm safety, child labor, personal health, crop disease prevention, post-harvest production and crop marketing to rural farmers. Over 8,000 farmers receive this information via SMS and text message free of charge. The service

is available to any Ghanaian with a cell phone, and tips are delivered in English or the local language.

The branded opportunity

Where can brands make a difference? The answer is everywhere. Hershey’s sponsors CocoaLink as part of its commitment to corporate social responsibility. It is one of the few mobile initiatives supported by a major brand, which is a big miss for many marketers when it comes to producing higher employee morale and marketplace goodwill. And, FYI: brands

that implement impactful CSR and sustainability campaigns are eligible to be listed on the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI), a group of stocks that has consistently outperformed the equity market since 1999. It's not an exaggeration to say that mobile devices have played a major role in achieving economic empowerment, changing governments and disseminating vital information across MEA. Brands must recognize that this is an opportunity to support and connect with a massive youth audience eager to learn and improve their lives. There are 200 million youths between the ages of 15-24 across Africa alone. Across the region, this age group uses its phones to share information among friends, enable peer learning and adopt self-directed personalized learning habits. Think of how many brands, in categories that have appeal for young people aged 15-24, could become key players in making a difference and earning brand respect and preference at the same time. All it takes is a clear vision, a desire to help and a mobile phone – a device that will play a much more fundamental role in improving the lives of millions in the next five to ten years. Which brands will seize the opportunity?

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