

TO GO BOLDLY

Driving the move to digital means harnessing mobile technology and, more importantly, being able to pioneer it, says MTN group chief commercial officer, Pieter Verkade

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The pace at which mobile technology has evolved in the past two decades is a phenomenon that was incomprehensible in 1994 when MTN was formed.

One of the most recognised brands on the continent, the mobile telecoms firm is a constantly changing organisation – one that never struggles to keep up with technology but rather leads and pioneers applications. Pieter Verkade, the company's group chief commercial officer, explains that the organisation's current focus is on driving growth beyond voice. 'We are creating a distinct customer experience as we continue to lead the delivery of a bold new digital world.

'We're grabbing the opportunity to develop innovative products and solutions, and fostering partnerships to accelerate the digital revolution in our markets. Some of these partnerships extend to local innovators who develop applications through our app competitions, including games, entertainment and other solutions for individuals, businesses and communities,' he says.

At a rate of six digital services launches per week across the MTN group, and with a market-leading position in 15 of its 22 operations in Africa and the Middle East, stepping outside of traditional voice and into the digital arena means the company will be maximising opportunities within internet and digital applications, and broadening its e-commerce platform and lifestyle offerings.

MTN Mobile Money is such a driver. In the first six months of 2014, the number of registered subscribers grew by 24.3% to 18.4 million, with a high percentage of active users. Proclaimed as a safe, secure and affordable way for individuals to bank, users can make purchases, pay for utility services and manage money via cellphone networks.

Through an extension of the service, users in Côte d'Ivoire can now pay for online purchases on e-commerce website Jumia using MTN Mobile Money, and soon they will be able to do the same on several global digital 'malls' through a partnership with Skrill. In SA, Mobile Money has been extended beyond a mobile wallet and now includes a regulatory compliant bank account that allows transactions at any Visa point-of-sale and automated ATM within the country.

Skrill offers interesting prospects for MTN. According to Verkade: 'This liaison is an important step in our endeavour to offer customers the ability to use MTN Mobile Money to make online payments, further enhancing our mobile money wallet. After Côte d'Ivoire and Rwanda, we will be extending this service to Benin and Uganda.'

Two other highlights include Roam Like Home, which was launched in 19 countries to offer customers better rates when roaming in MTN markets. In Nigeria, during July, MTN launched Music+, a music-streaming service focused on local music where it leverages off partnerships with local artists.

'The emergence of new mobile technologies presents plenty of opportunities to bridge the digital divide and stimulate entrepreneurship on the continent,' says Verkade. 'Technologies are not only changing the way people interact but how consumers and businesses purchase and sell goods and services.

'To further ensure that the growth of telecoms benefits broader communities, and leveraging on the extensive reach of mobile phones, we have an opportunity

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as role players to innovatively deliver essential health and financial services to even the most remote part of the continent.'

The company takes the continent's health issues very seriously. 'MTN has joined with the GSMA and other partners in a mobile development mhealth [mobile health] initiative, essentially a new cross-ecosystem partnership designed to provide a range of mhealth services to sub-Saharan women and children, with a focus on nutrition.

'Telecoms is an ideal vehicle to help bridge the digital divide and enable communications, socio-economic inclusivity and even, to some extent, address broad socio-economic issues while creating new revenue streams for business,' says Verkade. 'As a result, more people connect to each other and the internet using mobile phones. Also, an increasing number of African countries are launching broadband internet connectivity, further opening up the potential of digital services on the continent.'

MTN doesn't just play in Africa. It's in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Cyprus and Iran too. Verkade himself was based in Cyprus as MTN's CEO before coming to SA. His extensive telecoms experience spans developed and emerging markets in the EU and Africa, and he has held senior commercial/marketing positions in various telecoms companies in the Netherlands, UK, Belgium and Norway.

Such experience serves Verkade well as MTN leads the drive for a more digital world. A drive with passion, he says. 'By making the vision visible through real services, we share that passion across the group and our markets.' ■