

BUILDING CONSUMER CONFIDENCE IN ICT's

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Positive things are happening in the African Continent today. Network growth has been accelerating at levels not known in the continent before the dawn of the new millennium. With the privatisation and market liberalisation going on at a fast rate, new sources of funding are opening up and new Africa-grown international operating companies are beginning to emerge.

The result of all this is the fast growth of wireless and mobile networks and with many people in both urban and rural areas owning their own phones for the first time.

In Nigeria for instance, the number of telephone lines grew from about 435,000 (410,000 fixed & 25,000 mobile) in August 2001 to 2.8 million (0.7 fixed & 2.1 million mobile) by August 2003. In those two years, mobile lines grew at the rate of one million lines per annum.

About 70% of the current mobile subscribers do not have or own fixed lines either at home or at work and therefore depend on mobile phones for their business, private and home communications needs. Fixed wireless services have also been growing, though not anywhere as fast as the Mobile.

With the rollout of the fourth GSM operator, it is estimated that by the end of December 2003, the number of subscriber lines would have hit the 4 million mark.

This trend of unprecedented growth in subscriber lines is also noticeable in a number of African countries where a new set of active consumers are beginning to emerge. A few years ago the challenge was to provide access to a continent that was widely regarded as the 'missing link'. The consumer was not really there at any significant level to have a voice. Today it is all different and the African consumer is now experiencing the benefits that information and communications technologies (ICT) brings.

But like has been observed in other parts of the world, what make the headlines are not the remarkable growth in subscriber lines and the benefits of ICT to the new set of consumers in emerging markets. Issues such as cost of the service to the consumer, health scares about the RF transmission levels in mobile phones, quality of service, spam mails/texts, etc, dominate discussions. As networks expand, there is therefore a need to build consumer confidence. Regulators and network operators have a daunting task to ensure that this happens. Consumer protection and consumer education help to build consumer confidence and must therefore consistently be in focus.

Avenues must be created for consumers who require information to have fast and ready access to such information. Regulators and Operators alike must have Frequently Asked Questions and Answers (FAQA) published at the organisation's website as well as regular publications that are available in the public domain.

For regulators and operators in Africa, where many phone users may not have ready access to the internet, innovative ways of ensuring consumer education must be devised.

For example, the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) recently introduced a nationally televised programme “The Consumer Parliament”. At this forum, which is facilitated by the regulator, the consumer is brought face to face with the operators and service providers. They have a chance to relate their experiences on television and get explanations from the operators, service providers and the regulator.

Since it is broadcast on national television, other viewers are able to share in the experiences of other users and in the explanations given. The result is that the operators are anxious to improve on services and avoid or minimize being exposed in public. The consumer parliament also provides a good forum for consumer education on the activities of the operators, reasons for certain actions, the rights of the consumer, issues relating to security and privacy, and the role of the regulator.

In conclusion, I wish to state that competitiveness of a market is critical to consumer satisfaction and building consumer confidence. Without adequate competition, consumer satisfaction can hardly be guaranteed or achieved. Regulators must therefore watch the market and ensure competitiveness in all segments of the market

It is also advisable that all information about operators and their services must be in the public domain. Transparency is a very important requirement for building consumer confidence and trust. Possible areas of uncertainty and doubt especially on security and privacy issues should be promptly addressed through open forum discussions and published FAQA.

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