

Why we should be investing in engagement

 By [Glenn Gillis](#)

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South Africa, alongside some of our BRICS partners, is globally recognised as among the most fertile grounds for new consumption of smartphones, online content and mobile applications.

Cell phone penetration is already high. The 2014 results of the All Media Products (AMPS) survey show that 97% of adults have at least one cell phone within their household.

Arthur Goldstuck, MD of World Wide Worx, predicts that almost half of all South African adults will be using smartphones by the end of 2015 - and by 2020, there won't be anything else available on the market. In an article that appeared in the *Mail & Guardian* in July of 2014, Goldstuck located these predictions in part in sales data from PEP stores - South Africa's largest mobile phone retailer - that showed "radical transformations in the phone-buying habits of the low- and middle-income segments of South Africa's population".

Recent data from World Wide Worx and Geopoll, collected through the Mobile Africa 2015 survey, reports that about 34% of South African mobile phone users download apps: viewed as indicative of rates of smartphone adoption. Similarly, in 2014 the Pew Research Centre found that 34% of South Africans had smartphones, and 55% had cell phones but not smartphones, and 10% had no phone at all.

The need for apps

For those of us operating within the digital economy, our prospects for innovation, development, sales, and a healthy dose of competition, have never been more exciting.

These opportunities are even more intensified by recent shifts towards e-learning nationally, and plans are afoot for the rollout in the Western Cape and elsewhere in South Africa this year.



Image via [123RF](#)

Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on where you sit, this means a lot of pressure to escalate content production. Corporates that have just mastered a social media strategy are suddenly needing their own apps, while traditional textbook producers are frantically attempting to digitise.

Whether in the private, public or non-governmental sector, there will also always be a prerogative to assess - and hopefully confirm - the greater utility, uptake, and impact of new digital products. We then begin the search for meaningful data by scrutinising website traffic, app downloads and dutifully quantifying our various friends, followers and fans.

This data allows us a more comprehensive understanding of return on investment (ROI) than was ever possible before. We no longer have to extrapolate viewership of that big billboard next to the highway, or a costly half-page ad in a print newspaper.

But many fall short at the question of determining how digitisation has actually led to behaviour change. Does a few minutes of web "snacking" lead to sales conversions? What about a spontaneous app download? How do we ensure pay-off from the digital content in which we have invested so many creative hours and so much money?

ROE insights

Some new direction has come in the form of moves to compliment ROI measures with of return metrics like engagement (ROE). And yes, between leveraging synergies and macro stickiness and generally blue sky approaches, anyone can be forgiven for fleeing the boardroom at the first hint of marketing jargon.

Still, and hear us out on this one, the ROE appears to have insights to offer. Its premise is that relationships with content producers and users have been one-sided for far too long. Producers create content and then, through blind faith, clever promotion and let's face it, mild coercion, attempt to flash it across as many screens as possible in hopes that it will make some kind of lasting impression.

In reality, many don't. Hundreds of thousands of apps wait out their first lonely year in an app store, with fewer than a thousand downloads apiece. And let's not talk about the inefficiencies in above-the-line media spend.

ROE recognises that the best way to both attract users and retain them in the long-term is to create opportunities for interaction. And games and stories are among the best tools for the job.

The satisfaction and mental stimulation that comes from adventure play, narratives, negotiating obstacles and triumphing over adversity are fundamental to the human condition.

Your company's social media strategy might increase brand awareness and visibility. You might get more Google hits, and if you are lucky, these might convert to new users and more sales.

But interaction and engagement are what keep your users and customers - whoever they may be - coming back to learn and play.

Engaged marketing approach

There are clear pay-offs for corporates through an engaged marketing approach. The My Starbucks Reward programme is an often-cited example of a highly successful gamified loyalty scheme that has seen massive increases in membership.

The Starbucks app captures customer information and buying behaviour, allows the accumulation of stars (points), and offers both rewards (free food and drink) as well as random prizes, downloadable songs and other give-aways. Importantly, it also allows for comments and feedback.

Locally, brands like Woolworths are moving towards more co-creation and gamification in marketing, including through a highly successful digital take on a traditional Easter Egg hunting game developed by Sea Monster.

These pay-offs are also clear for education and within the public and non-governmental sector, there is also growing, scientifically valid evidence of improved learning outcomes - not through tech alone, but through use of creative games and stories to communicate information effectively.

Our recent work in this area includes an animated explainer video for ACSA about the benefits of the extension of the runway at Cape Town International Airport, and the innovative Choma game commissioned by HIVSA. We encourage you to download Choma and learn how to set life goals, avoid the sugar daddies in your path and practice safe sex!

The analytic possibilities that come with ROE are qualitative, comprehensive and wide. Imagine the difference between just reporting on your website traffic, versus knowing how many users have downloaded your game, how often they play and for how long, hearing their direct experiential feedback, and ultimately, the capacity to assess for learning and behaviour change?

ROE remains a relatively new practice, and there is still a great deal of work to be done in developing methods and building business cases. But finally, it alludes to a tool that can truly gauge the impact of digital content with the nuance and complexity that we put into development.

This article forms part of a presentation delivered on 14 April to the 3rd Annual Learning LandsCAPE conference in Cape Town.

ABOUT GLENN GILLIS

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