

Easing the mobile data burden

 By [Greg Chen](#)

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After years of waiting, South Africans have been promised relief from high mobile data charges. In his June State of the Nation Address (SONA), President Cyril Ramaphosa heeded the call of the country's citizens to make it easier and cheaper for them to get online with their mobile devices.



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His first step in doing so was the announcement that there would be policy clarity around spectrum (the radio frequencies mobile networks use to transmit data) allocation by August 2019. The mobile networks reacted positively, indicating that data prices could start falling the moment that the new spectrum (the first to be released in 14 years) is allocated.

Even if this proves to be the case, however, it's unclear how much prices will fall by. Unless the cost of data falls dramatically and across the board, low-income earners will continue to pay more than their fair share for mobile internet access.

It's clear, therefore, that easing the mobile data burden cannot fall to the mobile networks alone and that business has a role to play too.

The business imperative

In fact, in a tough economy, businesses have a lot to gain from helping their customers stay online for as long, and at as low a cost as possible.

With readily available internet access, shoppers can find the best deals available and commuters can find the most efficient and affordable routes to and from their places of work. The cumulative savings from this information can be significant, especially for people struggling to get by every month.

If your business can help people use the internet for all of those things, they're bound to think of you more positively, seeing you as their preferred digital channel, and maybe even spend some of the money they've saved with you.

At the very least, businesses should acknowledge that consumers shouldn't bear the entire cost of seeing any online promotions and marketing collateral that the businesses send out. Imagine if consumers had to pay to view your printed ads in their postbox, or if they were charged an entrance fee to enter your store.

While that might seem like a strange leap of logic, it's worth bearing in mind that few other forms of media ask people to pay to see advertising (as someone is doing when they use their mobile data to read a newsletter or view a link they've been sent).

Practical implementation

As much as a business might understand that intellectually, they may not be aware of what practical steps they can take to ease the data burden on their customers.

An important first step is to ensure that your marketing collateral is as personalised and relevant as possible.



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This approach ensures that customers don't waste data browsing collateral that's not relevant to them. This also benefits the business, saving it from wasting money on irrelevant marketing.

Other tangible ways businesses can start making massive changes to data affordability is by employing data-efficient collateral in the digital space. In other words, businesses sending out marketing to lower-income earners need to keep their material as data-light as possible. This is increasingly easy to do without compromising on the overall experience.

Perhaps the most important step companies can take, however, is to reverse billing data, for customers coming into their website or service (that is, the business absorbs the cost of the data a customer uses accessing that website or service). Another option is to utilise channels and engagement tools that have already zeroed the data cost.

After all, paying for that data would cost the business a lot less, proportionally, than it would the end consumer.

The big picture

Ultimately, whatever steps business takes to ease the data burden on ordinary South Africans, it needs to do so with the big picture in mind. Internet access is vital to accelerating economic growth, and in South Africa that means making data as affordable as possible.

Without affordable data access, South Africa risks falling behind, not only the rest of the world, but the rest of the continent. And unless business addresses this pivotal issue, it risks the same fate.

ABOUT GREG CHEN

Greg Chen is the CEO and co-founder of Mbbiz. He has a long history in the South African mobile space and is passionate about the role technology can play in engaging the country's people across the spectrum

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