

# Google goes low-tech to unleash Nigeria potential

September 18 2012, by Yinka Ibukun

---



In this photo taken, Monday, Sept.17, 2012. An unidentified man walk past a Google advert in Lagos, Nigeria. With all its cutting-edge technology, Google Inc. has turned back to the text message in its efforts to break into Nigeria's booming economy. The search engine has started a service in Nigeria, as well as Ghana and Kenya, allowing mobile phone users to access emails through text messaging. That comes as the company's office in Lagos has begun working with small business owners in this nation of more than 160 million people. (AP Photo/Sunday Alamba)

(AP)—Despite all its cutting-edge technology, Google Inc. has turned to the humble text message to break into Nigeria's booming economy.

The search engine has started a service in Nigeria, as well as in Ghana and Kenya, which enables [mobile phone users](#) to access emails through

text messaging.

That comes as Google's office in Lagos has begun working with [small business owners](#) in this nation of more than 160 million people, bringing more than 25,000 businesses online over the past year.

Google's choice of using text messages to reach consumers highlights the challenges of doing business in Africa's most populous nation. There is money to be made, but most people rarely have access to electricity, let alone the Internet, and a \$20 mobile phone is as close as many will ever come to owning a computer.

"We don't want to just come in and start looking for how to generate profit," said Affiong Osuchukwu, Google's Nigeria marketing manager. "We consider (sub-Saharan Africa) to be an investment region. We know we have to invest resources and time to develop the market in order for the market to become valuable to us in a way that we can do business."



In this photo taken, Thursday, Sept.13, 2012, Affiong Osuchukwu, google's Nigeria marketing manager, speaks to the Associated Press, during an interview, in Lagos, Nigeria. With all its cutting-edge technology, Google Inc. has turned back to the text message in its efforts to break into Nigeria's booming economy. The search engine has started a service in Nigeria, as well as Ghana and Kenya,

allowing mobile phone users to access emails through text messaging. That comes as the company's office in Lagos has begun working with small business owners in this nation of more than 160 million people. (AP Photo/Sunday Alamba)

Google makes tens of billions of dollars a year from advertising, much of it coming from simple [text ads](#) that pop up next to its search results. But such ads are rarely relevant to Nigerians looking for goods and services in their neighborhoods. Only a fraction of business owners have websites, and those that do rarely offer consumers many services online.

Google Nigeria is trying to "develop the ecosystem" by making the Internet part of more people's lives, Osuchukwu said. Its most recent push came in July as the company began advertising its text message [email service](#), which allows users to receive their emails through [Gmail](#) for free as text messages. Users also can reply to the emails for only the cost of sending a text message. They also can access local classified ads hosted by Google.

Google officials declined to offer usage statistics for the [text message](#) service. But the service, advertised across billboards and buses in Nigeria's largest city Lagos, could provide a way to bring the search engine into the lives of people otherwise untouched by it. More than half of the 44 million people who use the Internet in Nigeria access the web through smartphones, according to International Telecommunications Union. But that represents only a fraction of [mobile phone](#) users in Nigeria, a nation turned mobile-reliant by the collapse of the state-run telephone company which has left landlines almost nonexistent.

By getting the Internet to the simplest of handsets, Google is making a bet it can reach consumers it can ultimately make money from, as well as

offer access millions otherwise wouldn't have.

"The Internet is an enabler," said Taiwo Kola-Ogunlade, a Google spokesman in West Africa. "I may not have as much money as you but I can have enough social capital to drive as much influence as you do."

[Google](#) isn't alone in trying to add low-tech features to its interface to broaden the Internet's reach. There's an emerging technology industry trying to increase access to basic and sometimes life-saving information on the web.

Sproxil Inc., a Cambridge, Massachusetts-based company, has partnered with pharmaceutical companies to allow people to verify the authenticity of drugs before purchasing them. This comes as Nigeria is awash with counterfeit drugs.

Meanwhile, a Seattle, Washington-based technology startup called SlimTrader offers consumers in [Nigeria](#) and Senegal the ability to discover, preview and purchase goods and services from mobile phones that aren't Internet-enabled.

SlimTrader's CEO Femi Akinde said: "To reach a lot more people, you've got to reach them on the most ubiquitous device possible."

Copyright 2012 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Citation: Google goes low-tech to unleash Nigeria potential (2012, September 18) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-09-google-low-tech-unleash-nigeria-potential.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.