

Google offers free Internet to S.African mobile users

November 14 2012



Customers take a subscription in a cell phone shop in Johannesburg. Google said on Wednesday it has entered into a deal with South Africa's giant telecoms operator Telkom to offer free Internet access to mobile phone subscribers that cannot afford data costs.

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Under the deal dubbed "Free Zone," subscribers to Telkom's 8ta [mobile phone service](#) can access the web and versions of [Gmail](#) and [Google+](#) without paying for data charges, as long as they have data-enabled handsets.

"Around 80 percent of South Africans have a cell phone, and much of this mobile resource is untapped due to data charges that many cannot afford," Google South Africa manager Luke Mckend told AFP.

Many [mobile phone users](#) find data charges for email, web browsing and social applications, to be too expensive.

"Our goal is to make more of the [mobile web](#) affordable for everyone, in order to enrich their lives with information at their fingertips," said Mckend.

Google launched a similar deal with a mobile phone provider in the Philippines earlier this month.

Amith Maharaj, senior managing executive at 8ta, said the idea is to help South Africa, the wealthiest country on the continent, keep pace with the rest of the developed world.

"Breaking down the barriers to Internet adoption is critical for South Africa to keep up with the rest of the world in terms of socio-economic development," he said, citing World Bank studies that a 10 percent rise in Internet use could result in one percent increase in GDP.

"Now 8ta subscribers can enjoy a free value added service to explore the Internet, check emails and connect with friends, ultimately boosting internet adoption in South Africa."

The deal is on trial until the end of May next year.

8ta is the mobile phone brand for the Johannesburg Stock Exchange-listed Telkom, South Africa's largest fixed line phone company but struggling parastatal.

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Citation: Google offers free Internet to S.African mobile users (2012, November 14) retrieved 22 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-11-google-free-internet-safrican-mobile.html>

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