



Mig33 platform drives political dialogue

By Lezette Engelbrecht Posted: 2th April 2009

Mig33, which claims to be the largest global mobile Internet community, has extended its services and operations in SA ahead of the elections.

With 20 million users worldwide, including a few million in SA, mig33 is extending its mobile communications and online community to include a mobile political social network. This will enable organisations to create a two-way communication channel with their members.

After witnessing the success of social networking in the Barack Obama campaign in the US, mig33 adapted its services to offer a mobile version for developing markets like SA. It invited political parties to set up mig33 mobile groups in order to reach and interact with supporters during the election period.

Mig33 global CEO Steve Boom says it offers a forum for all voters and political parties. "It can change the nature of political discourse in SA, moving from a monologue by a politician to a dialogue between the politicians and the voters, as well as among the voters themselves."

Once a group member, users can stay up to date on important announcements, organise local events and engage with other members, and party leaders, about different issues, the company said in a media statement.

The mobile generation

Given that vastly more South Africans have access to mobiles than PCs, mig33 offers a way for social networking services usually accessed via computers to become available on cellphones.

"If local parties have seen the value in Facebook, imagine the impact this service could have on a mobile platform," the company said in a statement. It points out that while SA has about 4.5 million PC-based Internet users, nearly 10 million make use of mobile Internet. "Its spread is phenomenal, especially considering how it has become a campaign tool during the current elections."

According to Anthony Hazell, DA director of relationship management, nothing compares to the penetration of mobile. "It's a way to reach far more people and provides a strong personal attachment. Mobile allows for one-on-one interaction versus a mass broadcast to many, it's something people can opt in and out of."

Boom says one of mig33's features is that it's designed to be available on almost any mobile phone, not just high-end or smartphones. He adds that mig33 currently works on over 2 500 different mobile phone models. "Mobile is the most pervasive medium and it's always with you. There is no better medium in the world for communication."

Although the company does not have estimates for how the political groups will grow the number of South African users and by when, Boom is optimistic: "We're confident that we have a really exciting product roadmap, and that our community will be growing even more rapidly now."

Politically connect

According to mig33, the use of social media in politics has already proven to be “an incredibly effective campaign tool, enabling politicians to establish an ongoing dialogue with their supporters and creating opportunities for voters to self-organise in support of their candidates”.

Four South African political parties, the ANC, DA, ID and UDM, have taken the opportunity to set up mobile groups on mig33.

ANC spokesman Steyn Speed says the party’s group has grown to 2 000 members in a few weeks. “At the moment the focus is on sending important information about our election campaign to supporters, as well as hosting discussions around the election topics outlined in our manifesto.”

Speed says the rise of social networking has enabled the party to interact with citizens directly and respond quickly to comments in a way that traditional media don’t allow.

“The main difference we’ve picked up is that citizens now demand a much faster response from our representatives. We expect that by the next general elections, social media will form a vital component of any party’s election efforts.”

According to Hazell, the DA provides content, announcements and e-mail on its mobile group platform and will continue exploring the mobile channel.

“It’s no longer a case of communicating with voters on your terms. You have to find them where they are and one place they are is on mig33.”

UDM election manager, Jana Warffemius, says social networking can be helpful in getting messages to supporters at a moment’s notice. However, she believes mobile social networking’s biggest advantage can also be its biggest disadvantage.

“It takes a lot of effort to maintain a mobile site in order to utilise it effectively. If you don’t update content regularly, it can be a wasted effort.”

Warffemius adds that some may find these new methods of political communication intrusive, such as receiving unsolicited SMSes from parties they don’t support. “There’s a careful line you have to tread when it comes to using technology in campaigning.”

The ID has also set up a mig33 mobile group but did not respond to questions regarding its use of the service.

Making messages multiply

Boom says launching the mobile groups service during the current election campaign was aimed at creating a forum around public issues, in an engagement style the younger generation has already embraced.

Mig33’s political community platform offers features like Chat Stadium, where a political party can host over 1 000 users and engage in a live discussion session in real-time.

“The focus is shifting from just providing information to actually involving people in the process,” says Hazell.

He adds that social networking has expanded communication capabilities. “It’s changed the situation from where the message is always controlled from the centre to a system of message multiplication. Now we provide information and the tools to support it, and people go out and spread it in their own way. The power of social media lies in harnessing that support.”

In conjunction with the political mobile group service, Boom also announced the expansion of mig33’s operations in SA and the African continent. The company set up a local joint venture with South African partners in order to accelerate its market development activities in Africa.

“We hope to provide a service that continues to improve and enrich the lives of our users in different ways. We know that if we can provide such a service, our SA community will grow rapidly,” said Boom.

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