PIONEERS OF THE MOBILE UNIVERSE

Internet and mobility is at the very core of France 24's strategy. Today the company positions itself not as a pure broadcaster or as a pure website publisher but rather as a multimedia – or even plurimedia – platform of news content delivery to any type of screen on any device. **Stanislas Leridon**, Internet and New Media Director at **France 24**, explains

We are about to launch in the French market an interactive television service that will be first deployed on the French IPTV network and we are already working on the transfer of the same interactive TV service to mobile handsets. For us it is critical to address our core targets - opinion leaders, especially on mobile. They are over-equipped compared with the average population with the latest generation, state of the art multimedia handsets - the iPhone but also Nokia with Symbian, Windows Mobile and of course BlackBerry too.

When Orange UK launched the iPhone 30,000 units sold on the first day. Does this mean there is a demand from people who want to have everything in their pocket?
The iPhone was a major breakthrough into the mobile industry. It's in essence the melting pot of all terminals or functionality you would expect from a small device. It's a payment terminal, it's a multimedia content device, it's an eco-system in itself with the iTunes Store.

Some of your competitors are charging for access to their iPhone bulletins but France 24's offer is free. Do you see a move from free information to paid information?
It is quite hard to give a single answer to this issue. We decided initially to launch the application free of charge as first of all we were in a position to challenge established, well-known brands and secondly we were pioneers.

We are now in the process of enhancing the existing application, and developing another application together with Radio France Internationale and TV5 Monde, dedicated to learning French.

For the second application we are looking at a mixed model of free access and premium access – I think for certain content there might be room for charging the end user.

One of the challenges of doing anything in the new media space is telling people you are out there and that you have an offer...
What we have seen over the last years is the need to address, talk and work with anyone within the value chain of the mobile industry. You have got the end customer, you have got the operator, you have got intermediate platforms such as iTunes or Ovi or Windows Marketplace, and others yet to come, you have got the mobile handset manufacturers.

We are also talking to content aggregators because on a local basis sometimes it is better to talk with these aggregators that are able to offer a one-stop-shop to mobile operators. I think you need to reach every player in the value chain and not focus on one specific area.

> "Mobile operators have to teach their market how to watch TV on their handset"

How do you go about assessing who these potential partners are and working out their value to you?
It is becoming quite complex. We focus on the players in every category that have the highest market share or potential.

The other thing we did – and I realise this is more and more an asset – was to bring into the equation content from our sister companies.

When you meet with a mobile operator in Africa or the Middle East and you are able to combine video content from France 24 in three languages, radio programmes, text and multimedia content from RFI in up to 19 languages, plus TV5 Monde, you are much more interesting and powerful.

What reaction has there been from users to your mobile offer?
We were quite astonished by the success of mobile applications – the future lies in mobile applications, that's the initial feedback and feeling we are getting. Applications by themselves have a much higher potential than mobile phones, they

▲ From left: English video podcasts on the iPhone; Stanislas Leridon; Arabic mobile newscast

are easy to use, you can notify the users, there is so much behind these applications.

We are still working on aggregating and monitoring the various traffic and audiences we are getting through different devices - so that we can follow one user from his visit on the web site to his visit on our mobile web site or his visit to our mobile application. For this we are not getting as much information as we would like from Apple or from mobile operators.

There is also still a lot to do in terms of monetisation of content. We are all looking with interest at what Android will bring to the market. This is because Google is behind Android and Google will probably have the same strategy as they have on the web - a free advert-supported model. How this will impact on the revenues that we could generate from platforms such as Apple or Ovi has to be looked at and investigated.

My overall impression is this mobile market is still in its infancy, still unstable and not yet structured. But definitely this is the way to grow.

There has to be ongoing dialogue between you and companies active in the mobile space - how easy is it to engage with them?

I think mobile operators themselves are still on a learning curve, they have to teach their market how to watch TV on their mobile. The operators also have to take into consideration the threat that terrestrial TV on mobile will bring to them, they are facing competition from different sources.

There is also the threat of Android for the big existing players, such as Nokia, so the cards are being reshuffled all the time.

Is that an opportunity or a threat for broadcasters?

It is probably both. We know that news is the first type of content requested by the customer, so I think for news content producers it is an opportunity because in the end, whatever the technology, whatever the device, customers will always look for content.

On the other hand, the more the complex and fragmented the market becomes, the tougher it is for us to address all these different formats and different technologies. It would be far easier if there was only one operating system, only one browser, only one processor, only one video format.

What are the big opportunities in the next two years?

Big question! In the mobile market, the pace of renewal is very high, and I guess that mobile handsets will disappear and it'll all be about smartphones. That will be an opportunity for us as the market shares will change between the existing players. The market will be split between iPhone, BlackBerry, Android, Symbian and Windows Mobile, and who knows there may be some consolidation as well in this area.

What I know for sure is that news will remain important content for customers and they will expect news to come to them through their mobile because they have their mobile with them 16 hours a day.

It will be all about notifications, alerts, SMS, rich content systems, something which is enhancing SMS or MMS. If you take Asia, Europe, Africa and the Middle East or even North America, these are the markets where mobile is becoming the device.

In Japan, more and more people surf on the web through their mobile rather than their PC. It will probably also change the way we do our job - everyone is now equipped with a camera and capable of reporting about everything from anywhere in the world.

Stanislas Leridon, thank you very much. ■

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