
Auto drivers turn richer with mobiles

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While mobile penetration continues to increase, a research amongst auto drivers reveals that unless products are designed for specific targets, mobiles for all may just remain a dream.

BANGALORE: Rare is a technology that touches our life as much as the advent of cellular has. Ever since its introduction, the mobile phone has grown to become one of the most popular forms of personal communication tools in India.

Though initially restricted to the urban elite, falling prices and newer services have ensured that the mobile is well on its way to becoming part of the common man's life, including auto rickshaw drivers—the community which is swiftly becoming 'fully mobile'.

However, one wonders whether the cell phone means the same to him as that to a young professional or is his relationship with the mobile different? Is he satisfied with the version available to him or does he want more?

According to the Bangalore based research firm, Center for Knowledge Societies (CKS), that tried to answer these questions, mobile phones have helped auto rickshaw drivers develop a stronger bond with customers. While earlier auto drivers used take specific routes to cover large part of the city, cell phones have made it easy for regular customers to call them up, thereby helping them to cut down on unnecessary roaming across the city in search of business. Assurance of calls from specific customers has helped them chart out the route in such a way that that they can be in areas closer to them.

The study also reveals that in most of the cases, though the driver buys the phone to keep in touch with his family, it later becomes a tool of income generation by facilitating repeat business. "They even like the idea of a bill that shows itself every time they use the phone, especially when they lend their phones to customers," explained a CKS operation member, Zeenat Hasan.

CKS has also made a four-minute documentary based on its interaction with 200 auto drivers in Bangalore. The film is aimed at helping technology designers in developing targeted technology products. According to Hasan, the initiative is an attempt by the organization to understand the dynamics between societies and technology and thereby help in designing better technology. "We believe that design is inseparable from other disciplines and as much a part of the research process as it is of a product," she said.

The research on auto drivers was triggered by the information that auto drivers in Trivandrum were increasing their accessibility by painting their phone numbers on their vehicles. "We recorded three important findings – change in the daily route, the phone becoming an income source from just an expense and an eventual shift in service providers from Reliance to Airtel," she said. That Reliance has single handedly been responsible for making the common man mobile can be judged by the fact that 70 percent of the respondents said they started off as Reliance subscribers.

While the survey reveals that 15 percent of these customers started off as Airtel prepaid subscribers, around 10 percent of people who start on Reliance change to Airtel. "The 80 percent Reliance subscribers, therefore, belong to the category of people who have been using mobiles for less than a month. The shift in service providers happens usually in one or two months," Hasan informed adding that 20 percent of the respondents have said

that mobile phone helped them in getting repeat business.

"A number of products and services can be developed keeping in mind their needs and desires. For example, we found that these drivers call up their friends to pass on messages to their family. That provides the idea of a double pack—one for him and one for his house," Hasan reiterated. The team also suggests more multilingual services and better local language interfaces for these drivers along with simpler and cheaper phones.

"These suggestions can be replicated for different non-elite communities. Careful planning and production of useful technology would certainly increase its adoption," she said adding that CKS is planning a similar research among shared autos in Agra. They are also working on a project to understand how GIS mapping could be useful to a man on the streets.

While some might feel that mobiles are the great levelers of our time, research like this shows that it might not be the case. No doubt mobile phones have become more accessible now, but the telecom industry is still far away from coming out with service packs to meet specific needs of people from different strata.

Though many companies are beginning to look at the non-elite segment, the understanding that one model cannot fit all segments is still largely missing. In fact, none of the service providers have yet been able to fully exploit the potential of the technology to create products and services for the common man. Whether research such as this, can help in realizing the common man's dream is a question that would be judged in times to come.

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