
THE BENEFITS OF PROVIDING AGRICULTURAL ADVISORY SERVICES

Eluid Ndekei Kiarie



In Kenya, an agro-advisory service is sending agricultural information direct to farmers' phones. To familiarise farmers with the technology, and to modify the product to meet farmers' needs, the Kenya Livestock Producers Association is marketing the service at rural trade fairs.

Cover An agent registering, subscribing and providing customer support to farmers

Industries today are becoming increasingly dependent on the computerisation of information. The digital revolution and use of technical devices to interact with each other has entered the domain of research, development and market launch. In Kenya, mobile penetration has reached 88.1%, and there are 37.8 million subscribers. Of these subscribers, 1 million are linked with the Kenya Livestock Producers Association (KLPA), which conveys agricultural advisory information to farmers. Even though such services were penetrating the Kenyan agribusiness market, KLPA required a platform to increase its reach.

AGIN, a Kenyan agricultural information-based company whose core business is digitalising agriculture services, and Airtel, a telecommunication firm based in Kenya, have formed a partnership to develop an agro-advisory service that sends agricultural information through the Airtel mobile network. Farmers, however, needed to be introduced to this service.

KLPA, which has been active since 2008, is a recognised farmer association that mobilises farmers and provides linkages between farmers and various agricultural stakeholders through organising monthly agribusiness trade fairs. KLPA was approached by Airtel to market its agro platform, Airtel-Kilimo, to farmers and modify the service to meet Kenyan farmers' needs.

The Airtel-Kilimo product was first launched in 2014 during a trade fair organised in the Thika Stadium, Kiambu County, central Kenya. This location was chosen because of the rich agricultural sector, a high population, and because the local government was providing partnership support. The platform was later piloted in Kisii in Kenya for the same reasons, and to initiate the diversification of the platform amongst other communities. Later that year, KLPA, in partnership with Airtel Kilimo and with cooperation from the Kisii County Government, held an agribusiness trade fair with the objective of creating farmer awareness of the Airtel network and Kilimo Platform, and to register and subscribe farmers to both organisations.

The agro-advisory information platform

Airtel Kilimo offers an advisory service to smallholder farmers that provides information on issues relevant to cropping systems, weather conditions and market prices via mobile phones. A lead partner in the service is the Commonwealth Agricultural Bureau International (CABI), who carried out the research responsible for the development of the customised and relevant content. CABI has created factsheets for each crop category, and stores these in its D2F (direct to farm) database.

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CABI creates mobile-ready content by formatting these factsheets into short tips that can be accessed via the USSD code – a global system for mobile communication technology that is used to send texts between a mobile phone and an application programme in the network. Customers access the service via the USSD channel which is available on any mobile using an Airtel network. All content is validated by the Kenya Agriculture Research Institute who ensure accuracy and quality, and translate the English content so it is also available into Kiswahili.

The service provides actionable and timely information on maize, amaranth, banana, beans, cabbage, coffee, mango, rice, passion fruit, and tomato value chains, as well as livestock practices. Airtel subscribers – both prepaid and post-paid – can register for this service via USSD on their mobile phones by dialling ‘*760#’ at a flat fee of KES 20 (€0.17) per week. However, farmers felt frustrated by the automatic deduction of credit, which in some cases could lead to a complete removal of SIM cards.

Airtel Kilimo’s target market of smallholder farmers was a challenging sector to reach owing to their dispersed locations, and their low and seasonal incomes. Thus, Airtel chose a below-the-line marketing technique in rural Kenya whereby the product was promoted via face to face marketing. In 2014 – and for a period of 10 months – KLPA was involved in promoting the platform through regional teams. KLPA has years of experience and expertise in mobilising farmer groups at county level, and was also assisted by county governments and agriculture departments.

Since 2008, KLPA’s objective and strategy has been to create linkages between farmers and various stakeholders in the corporate market through the

formulation of monthly agribusiness county trade fairs and exhibitions. Airtel sponsored KLPA with a monthly grant of KES 2 million (€17,100) to conduct agricultural trade fairs across the country, promoting the Airtel Kilimo platform as well as other core services like Airtel Money – an app that enables users to send money and pay bills. Using this strategy, KLPA was able to secure new customers for Airtel.

The Kisii county trade fairs

The Kisii agribusiness county trade fairs were developed in such a way to provide effective farmer mobilisation, and also create awareness about the platform. KLPA first contacted the county government and met with the county director of livestock to ensure local government involvement. The meeting was about agreeing on dates, location and logistics of the trade fair.

Second, and most important, was the mobilisation of a process that would bring all the farmers groups in the county to the exhibition. This process was spearheaded by the KLPA field staff through strategic meetings headed by KLPA’s chairman Geoffrey Gikungu. “The farmers are KLPA and KLPA is the farmers. The success of the day cannot happen without KLPA and it cannot be possible without the farmers,” says Gikungu.

The first meeting brought together all stakeholders in the agricultural, livestock, veterinary and fisheries sectors with the chairman and representatives of KLPA, to go through the mobilisation procedures that were most suitable for the county. These included local livestock exhibitions, as well as the mobilisation of community members through gatherings via churches and meetings of elders.

Below Airtel Kilimo live on a cell phone

The private sector and NGOs are also involved, and all stakeholders at the meeting were given responsibility for mobilisation. Subsequent meetings were held to provide reports on mobilisation progress, plan for the show's logistics and to bring farmer groups to the exhibition.

The mobilisation of stakeholders and exhibitors, carried out by the KLP secretariat, was headed by the CEO, Patrick Kimani. It was done by mapping and contacting all the local and national stakeholders in the agricultural sector – from financial institutions to local producers – who might be interested in exhibiting their products. Exhibitors would pay to acquire information stands and exhibit their products.

Extensive marketing of the agribusiness trade fair in Kisii was key. Various mediums such as radio announcements, short message systems, as well as fliers and posters, were used and four radio shows were developed to promote the fair. This created interest and a mood that encouraged word of mouth communication.

The agribusiness trade fair

Face-to-face marketing was effective in informing farmers about the platform, offering and assisting with registration and subscriptions, as well as providing on the ground customer support. KLP partnered with Airtel, the county governments, manufacturers and institutions, as well as farmer organisations at the trade fair, to deliver two components. The first was a business-to-consumer event where market linkages between farmers and manufacturers and suppliers and

agro vets, enabled farmer training on various value chains, access to legitimate farm inputs and information on best farming practices. This was followed by a business-to-business networking event, which consisted of a cocktail dinner designed to create networks within the manufacturing and service industries. Farmer representatives were given a chance to share their ideas about what had transpired during the fair during this event.

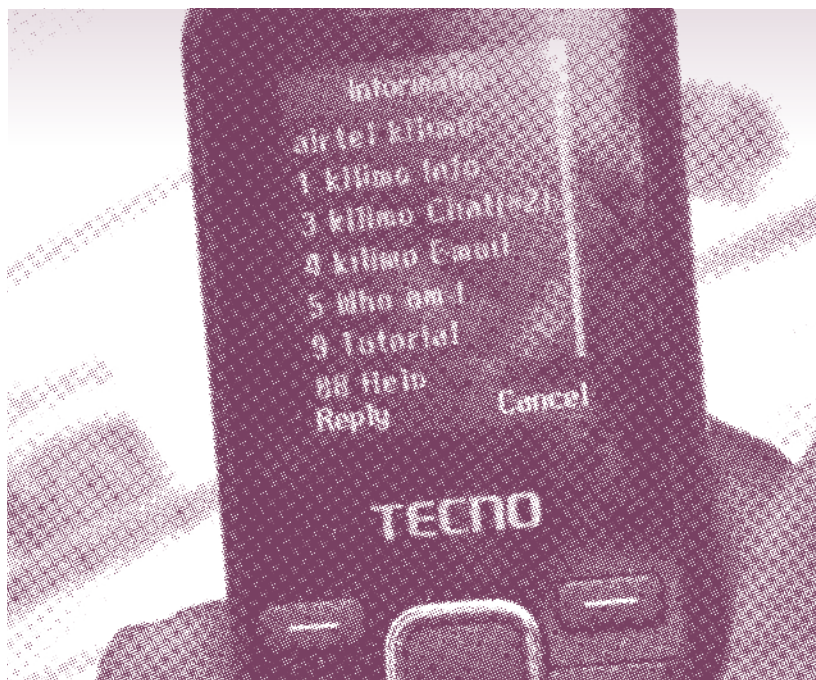
To achieve its goals, Airtel-sponsored banners were strategically placed at entrance points to the fair. There was a registration desk decorated in Airtel corporate colours and armed by trained Airtel agents in company shirts and hats. They were there to register subscribers and to act as customer support, as well as to hand over pre-integrated SIM cards to farmer group leaders. These agents were also deployed around the grounds to ensure the purchase of SIM cards. Over 4,000 of the 6,000 farmers who attended the Kisii fair registered and subscribed to Airtel Kilimo. Airtel also offered phones for sale to increase uptake.

Using the information provided

“After spraying with a fertiliser that I was told about by Airtel Kilimo my beans are doing great and I am projecting a big harvest. The information we are receiving is increasing and improving our farm produce, which will result in higher income and food security,” said one Kenyan farmer about the new technology.

Farmers are using information from Airtel Kilimo to make changes to their farms. According to an Airtel case study, of the 30 early adopters interviewed in 2014, around half used information from Airtel Kilimo to adjust their practices. These users reported various benefits from using the service, including increased farm efficiency. Users interviewed said they had found the information about planting the most valuable, and information about market prices and pests and diseases was also greatly valued. The crop with the highest farmer subscription rate was banana at 44%.

According to the case study regarding cost-related concerns, 75% of the customers who participated in a focus group discussion observed that the service cost of KES 30 (€0.25) per SMS could be a hindrance to farmer uptake. As a result, the price changed to KES 20 (€0.15) a week, a flat fee that was easier to communicate to users and which gave them access to all content types and functionalities, rather than being charged for individual content categories. The profile of Airtel Kilimo's regular users reflects the majority of its customer base, which is largely comprised of





Left KLPa Business to Business Cocktail agents have reasons to celebrate

subsistence smallholder farmers. In 2014, women comprised 37% of the user base – one of the highest ratios of women in GSM-supported farmer services.

The promotion of Airtel Kilimo has had indirect benefits for Airtel, including new acquisitions and greater brand loyalty in rural areas. Such impacts will also likely lead to increased users of other Airtel services such as Airtel Money. Adil El Youssefi, CEO for Airtel Kenya, observed that the agribusiness trade fair provided an opportunity for farmers to become familiar with Airtel Kilimo products, and for the company to address farmers' needs.

At KLPa's fair trade programme in Kisii County there was a large turnout of exhibitors and farmers. As a farmers' association, KLPa developed new technologies to register users and it now has 10,000 members on its group database. Live coverage of the trade fair on local radio and documentation through videos and photographs that could be easily accessed on the KLPa social site for future use, were appreciated by users. Now 4% of the rural population can easily access the information they need to improve agricultural practices and bring them out of poverty.

New opportunities

Airtel Kilimo faces stiff competition from the Safaricom mobile network service, and currently trails behind in users. But with the development of Airtel

Kilimo, it is building its presence in rural areas. Companies like Shamba Shape Up, which provides the same services across networks but at better rates, are also partnering with KLPa, enabling KLPa to provide members with free SMS messages.

KLPa is able to organise events easily and at reduced costs due to strong relationships with the local government, local stakeholders and farmer representatives. KLPa's contract with Airtel to create awareness about Airtel Kilimo, and its work linking farmers to the corporate world in various counties continued until the end of 2014. Around this time, the Kenya Commercial Bank contracted KLPa to link them with farmers in Marigat in Baringo county during the November 2014 trade fair. Later, KLPa was also linked to a United States Department of Agriculture sponsored project, K-Sales, because of its effective mobilisation capacity.

Finally, KLPa has developed its communication systems to involve mobile SMS invitations, e-mail marketing, photo and video documentaries, as well as a website developed to meet ongoing customer needs.



Eluid Ndekei Kiarie works as Program Officer for Communication and Information Technology Kenya Livestock Producers Association, KLPa.

E-mail: ekndekei@gmail.com

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