

Educational Tablets for Africa

Africa's potential digital market is fertile ground for investors

By Alica Gandserre

BEIJING, China, July 25, 2014 (ChinAfrica) -- During the past year, Africa has been described as a digital Eldorado by many international actors. Given the progressive saturation of the digital market in developed countries, emerging economies with low levels of equipment and strong growth capacity are seen as alternative markets with a promising future.

The digital field provides countless business and investment opportunities, particularly when it comes to tactile tablets - the rate of sales growth in emerging countries reached 145 percent in 2013.

Besides, increasing needs for mobile Internet technology on the African continent makes it an attractive target for many local and foreign manufacturers, not to mention the diversity and size of its market. However, the challenge lies in developing products that meet the specific needs and expectations of the countries in demand.

Hence educational tablets were introduced into the African market in October 2013. Designed primarily for primary and secondary schools as well as universities, they are expected to

facilitate access to technology and knowledge in a broad swath of previously underserved areas.

A means toward social development

Many African countries suffer from a serious educational deficit due to the use of outdated learning materials. In this context, educational tablets are seen as an instrument for social development. In addition to helping people acquire knowledge related to new technologies, the use of tablets also gives access to abundant and updated interactive resources as well as customized contents adapted to individual needs.

Fully designed for African school kids and their environment, the Qelasy tablet developed by Ivorian IT expert Thierry N'Doufou comes in three sub-brands respectively targeting children, adolescents and adults in the education system. In addition to being compatible with about 1,000 apps on Android 4.2, this tablet is linked to a website where teachers can submit all types of content and information for students and their families.

As part of the growing family of African tablets the Qelasy is expected to feature in the upcoming school year. The first African tactile tablet, the Way-C, developed by Verona Mankou from Congo, came out in September 2011, and Africa's first medical tablet, the Cardiopad, was designed and assembled in 2013 by Cameroonian Arthur Zang.

Tablets offer expanded learning opportunities that go beyond the academic aspect. Thus, the Chinese startup MySimax, whose main objective is to provide high-quality tablets to African students in the higher education system, plans to expand its services to key sectors such as health and public administration. The idea is to develop educational applications for people working in those fields and the ones benefiting from their services. J.X. Paulin, co-founder of MySimax, said “In order to progress, a country needs two things: educated people and healthy people.”

After 20 years of doing business in China, this Franco-Togolese entrepreneur aims to bridge the digital divide between African countries and other countries that are already firmly rooted in their time: not only the United States with innovative products like Google Glass, but also countries like Singapore, where the government supports the use of tablets in primary schools, and Thailand, which initiated the program “one tablet per child” in 2013. “Never in the history of Africa has the continent benefited from such a technology,” said Paulin about digital tablets. However, he believes that a successful digital switchover will require both a vision and resources.

China - major player in African digitization

Nowadays, most digital tablets are assembled near the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen. Assembly factories of renowned brands such as Apple and Hewlett-Packard are located in this area. As a manufacturing hub, China participates indirectly in the process of African digitization. But on the other hand, the country is also very active on the continent, particularly in East Africa where it became the leader of the digital infrastructure market.

However, China regularly faces criticism regarding the quality of its products, and the digital tablets market is no exception, especially because of the proliferation of low-cost devices equipped with unsuitable processors and low-quality batteries. This raises the perennial question of the balance between the reduction of manufacturing costs and the guarantee of good quality.

According to Thibaud André, an employee at MySimax, “China has been producing increasingly higher value-added products for decades. It is no longer the textile workshop of the world. Chinese brands such as Huawei and Lenovo are competing with market leaders and snatch market shares from Apple and Samsung. The key is to stop underspending on production in order to upgrade to leading brands.”

Innovative Chinese tablets

MySimax is committed to selling high-quality products at a more affordable price than market leaders. In addition to being specially developed by engineers, the tablets and applications of the brand are the result of a major benchmarking policy, Paulin told ChinAfrica.

Those 3G compatible tablets are equipped with a fast processor. They work on Android 4.2 and come with a bluetooth keyboard, a mouse and a stylus pen in order to ensure a convenient and straightforward use for the large number of tech novices in Africa. While developing the educational platform, engineers followed the same logic and focused on creating an intuitive tactile environment that wouldn't require the use of softwares likely to slow down the product.

Although the main ambition of Paulin is to generalize the use of educational tablets in Africa and make sure even the poorest have access to knowledge, realizing the transition toward a digital switchover is not an easy task. According to Paulin, member states of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) and sparsely populated countries appear to be the best candidates to target first. As a matter of fact, the brand's first tablets were designed for use in Gabon last year.

The Chinese startup is currently turning to the private sector which is "more practical and faster," according to Paulin, who hopes that the craze for educational tablets in private schools will pique the interest of public institutions. Indeed, only through this second channel will MySimax be able to equip as many students as possible for free or at a reduced price.

MySimax has already established a partnership with two Gabonese private schools in order to offer a scholarship called "China Journey" to the top students of their class. In addition to getting one semester in China with all costs covered, every beneficiary will receive the equivalent of 13,000 yuan (\$2,080). According to an agreement with the Sylvia Bongo Ondimba Foundation for the Family - a foundation headed by Gabon's first lady - every time 100 tablets are sold in the private sector, five will go to students who can't afford one. As modest as it seems, this contribution is a first step toward the ultimate goal of those who created the educational tablets: enabling everyone to learn in tune with the times. **(First published by ChinAfrica)**