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Small ads as first steps to Internet business: A preliminary survey of Cameroon's commercial Internet usage

by David Zeitlyn and Francine Barone

Abstract

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We have surveyed current commercial use of the Internet in Cameroon. This paper provides some data on Cameroon's presence on the Internet as an initial means of assessing the impact information technologies and the Internet have had on local business practices in Cameroon. We have found some NGOs promoting entrepreneurs and artisan producers to sell their wares. Alongside tourism and import/export listings, the use of small ads is predominant. Connectivity via fixed lines remains a bottleneck impeding expansion. Since mobile phone use is mushrooming, a suggested solution is the development of SMS-Web bridges.

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Introduction

The old news is that the Internet has arrived in Africa. What is still newsworthy at the beginning of the twenty-first century is the impact it has had and how it is being used in Africa. After the early promises (Barlow, 1998) there is already some documentation of both the successes (Zachary, 2004) and the infrastructural constraints on expansion [1].

This paper evaluates how Cameroonian businesses are using the Internet. We gathered information by making a thorough search of Web sites from and about Cameroon to evaluate the use being made of the Internet and e-commerce by businesses in Cameroon. We set out initially to answer two questions:

One: are there any Cameroon-based businesses that are making substantial revenue from the Web (apart from Internet cafés)? If so, what are they?

Two: are there any Cameroonians who are making substantial revenue from business conducted via the Internet?

In our survey, we examined the use of the Internet for trading, buying, selling and advertising by entrepreneurs, manufacturers, distributors, traders, artisans, local shops, international importers and exporters. We also considered the business prospects for Cameroonians (at home and abroad): are they able to expand within the world (Internet) marketplace through personal initiative, NGO-supported or local cooperative enterprises? We included international import/export ventures within this strand of research. These include the sale of Cameroonian-made goods via the Web and the provision of Western commodities for sale in Cameroon, as well as mutual interests in tourism. We were unable to assess the extent to which the people involved in these activities are making substantial (or at least appreciable) revenue from the Internet; this is far harder to establish and will be the focus of planned future research. As an initial orienting step, we performed some general Web searches to determine how Web sites from or about Cameroon are represented across seven popular domains. Overall, this paper provides some data on Cameroon's presence on the Internet as an initial means of assessing the impact information technologies and the Internet



Domain representation

In our initial exercise we sampled seven Internet domains (.info, .net, .com, .org, .cm, .fr and .uk), using Google to determine how Cameroon is represented, in general, across the Internet. We recognise this is a crude measure since it counts individual sites with many pages as equivalent to many small sites, but we also ran parallel searches for the Netherlands, a European country with a similar population to Cameroon. The comparison is telling.

Table 1: Domain specific search results from Google

	Cameroon OR Cameroun 1 June 2004 Number of hits (percent)	Netherlands OR Holland OR "pays bas" 7 June 2004 Number of hits (percent)
.cm:	3,910 (0.1)	2,530,000 (.nl) (9.3)
.info:	28,100 (0.7)	174,000 (0.6)
.fr:	131,000 (3.5)	631,000 (2.3)
.uk:	248,000 (6.6)	3,380,000 (12.4)
.net:	373,000 (9.9)	2,730,000 (10.0)
.org:	1,030,000 (27.4)	6,370,000 (23.4)
.com:	1,950,000 (51.8)	11,400,000 (41.9)
Total	3,760,100 (100)	24,685,000 (100)

Within each domain, several hundred sites were sampled. Consistent across all domains are sites dedicated to tourism and tourist information, mostly compiled by Americans or Europeans. Equally prominent are both foreign and local sites for Cameroon football news, statistics and merchandise. The .info domain is used primarily for governmental, economic, demographic and geographic information, including international bodies concerned with malaria, AIDS and environmental degradation. Also included are general interest sites displaying maps, pictures, encyclopaedic sources and anthropological information about ethnic groups in Cameroon. Online newspapers, guides and directories within Cameroon additionally use the .info domain. The .cm domain yields the fewest results and is comprised mostly of governmental bodies in Cameroon including the national assembly and finance, education, industry and environment ministries. Cameroonian press and official news sites, political parties, national banks, universities, and major corporations such as Air France and Orange also use the .cm domain. The use of the country domain is the most significant difference between the patterns of usage between Cameroon and the Netherlands. Registration for the .cm is controlled by Intelcam (the state-owned telecom) and is restricted to locally registered companies or other organizations. The .nl is, in principle, unrestricted geographically, however a postal address in the Netherlands is required for official correspondence.

The domains .com and .net overlap with the .info categories above, but there are many more community sites hosting forums and chat rooms where Cameroonians can connect, search classified ads, and discuss regional issues and sport. The .com domain also contains many sites for development agencies and news sites with pages dedicated to current affairs in Cameroon. The .org domain is primarily dedicated to organizations such as the World Bank, World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, British Council, Amnesty International, Wildlife Aid Fund, Human Rights Watch, Global Forest Watch, and other NGOs with interests in Cameroon. Most Cameroonian French language sites use the .fr domain. A majority of these are based in France and represent French embassies and consulates as well as provide health information for travellers and tourist guides. Personal pages with general facts about Cameroon comprise much of the .co.uk domain, including many tourist sites, health information, environmental concerns, world football, and a few trade sites.

Commercial Internet usage

There are three main ways in which the Internet is used by Cameroonians for business

As Mbarika (2002) and others have demonstrated, some of the barriers preventing faster and wider adoption of Internet commerce in less developed countries are the lack of reliable phone lines and the high cost of using them. To illustrate, early in 2004, the entire city of Bafoussam — a regional capital in Cameroon — lacked Internet connectivity for at least two days (when one of us (DZ) was trying to check his e-mail). Anecdotally, this appears to be not uncommon. The recent (and continuing) explosion in mobile telephony may offer a solution — especially when combined with the popularity of small ads that we have documented. Although GSM mobile phones in common use do not offer easy access to the Internet, there are other alternatives. ISPs with good Web connectivity can offer commercial two-way SMS-to-Web bridges enabling entrepreneurs with only a mobile phone to submit advertisements via SMS and then receive responses also as messages on their phones. We believe this can be done as a commercial service and is technologically feasible. 

About the authors

David Zeitlyn has been undertaking anthropological research in Cameroon since 1985 mainly with Mambila people on the Tikar Plain (see <http://lucy.kent.ac.uk/VIMS/>). He has been one of the pioneers in the use of the Internet to disseminate anthropological research data.

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Notes

1. Mbarika, (2002); Idowu, *et. al.* (2002); and, see also Zachary's (2004) discussion of Ghana as well as Uimonen (2001) for southeast Asian parallels.

2. See also: <http://www.networkedintelligence.com/asafe.html> and [PEOPLink](#).

3. See [Appendix A1](#) for an index of Cameroonian PEOPLink participants.

4. A list of which can be found in [Appendix A4](#).

5. For example, at www.ethnik.org, where six different artisans selling various objects from Cameroon are described and their products made available; and www.africancolour.com where Dr. Fongot Kinni of Yaounde's African Arts/Handicraft and Environmental Management Institute sells various objects including batik artwork and clothing.

6. The term comes from the Cameroonian pidgin for a buyer-reseller; see <http://www.bayam-sellam.com>.

7. For example, www.africanstylegallery.com and www.a-piece-of-africa.com/about.htm.

8. A list of major Web sites selling Cameroonian arts and handicrafts around the world can be found in [Appendix A2](#).

9. See [Appendix A3](#).

10. There are many of these sites, a short sample list can be found in [Appendix A5](#).

11. See [Appendix A6](#).

12. See [Appendix A7](#).

13. See, for example, <http://www.cameroontrade.com>, <http://www.happy-partners.com/>, and <http://www.algomtl.com/algopages.html>.

14. See [Appendix B1](#) for a list of participating importers.

15. A condensed list of popularly occurring companies and their desired imports can be found in [Appendix B2](#).

16. For example, <http://br.tradeholding.com> and <http://www.indiatradezone.com>.

17. <http://www.adlandpro.com/archives/230.htm>.

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Appendices

All sites were accessed in May and June 2004.

Appendix A — Products and services

1. CatGen (PEOPLink) participants:
 - PRESCRAFT:
<http://www.catgen.com/prescraft/EN/0.html>
 - Nchinda Wanjel Francis, carver from Oku:
http://www.cowboynafrica.com/resume/peoplink/carvers_wanjel.php
 - Bamenda Handicraft Cooperative Society:
<http://www.catgen.com/bamenda/EN>
 - Edwin Fotachwi's "House of Art," Bali–Nyongo:
<http://www.catgen.com/altest68/EN/>
2. Major Web sites retailing African/Cameroonian arts and handicrafts:
 - <http://www.africanstylegallery.com>
 - <http://www.a-piece-of-africa.com/about.htm>
 - <http://www.africadirect.com/>
 - <http://www.cameroonart.com>
 - <http://www.afribilia.com/>
 - <http://www.art-africain.com/>
 - <http://www.aaoparts.com/afriquee.html>
 - http://www.nigerbend.com/locdir/catalog_16.php3
 - <http://www.artisanat-africain.com/index.htm>
 - <http://www.african-art-work.com/>
 - <http://www.artofwestafrica.com/tresure.html>
3. Directories:
 - <http://www.cameroun-plus.com>
 - <http://www.cameroon-info.net>
 - <http://cemu10.fmv.ulg.ac.be/cameroun/>
 - <http://www.cameroonzoom.com>
 - <http://www.camerounlink.net/fr/index.php>
 - <http://www.camerounlink.com>
4. IT/ISPs:
 - <http://www.globalnet.cm/french/index.htm>
 - <http://www.camnet.cm/>
 - <http://www.abakwa.net/>
 - <http://www.douala1.com>
 - <http://www.iccnet.cm/>
 - <http://www.cybernum.net>
 - <http://www.cyberix.cm/>
 - <http://www.gcnet.cm/>
5. Independently-run Web pages for local businesses:

Artists (modern, abstract and performance art):

- Architecture and Design by Doualan Epee Ellong:
<http://www.padoukdesign.com/default.htm>
- Cameroonian artist from Yaoundé (site hosted by cultural centre in Edmonton, Canada):
<http://www.yaounde.ca/mbezele/>
- <http://goddyleye.lecktronix.net/>
- <http://dunagame.com/yaounde.htm>

- <http://dreamersreveurs.net/firms.com>
 - <http://membres.lycos.fr/sergiodesign/>
 - <http://www.essamba-art.com/main.htm>
 - <http://mapage.noos.fr/d.efang/index.htm>
 - Cameroon Theatre Festival Group:
<http://membres.lycos.fr/esanja/retic.htm>
- Restaurants and food:
- Restaurant, bakery, patisserie, café, supermarket (Douala):
<http://www.goodies-centre.com/>
 - Le Dernier Comptoir Colonial, Douala:
<http://www.cyberkoki.net/dcc/dcc.htm>
 - Coffee and tea:
<http://cameroun.cafe.free.fr/>
- Law firms:
- <http://www.henrijob.com/>
 - <http://www.henrysamuelson.com/>
- Cinema:
- <http://lewouri.cyberix.cm/acceuil.html>
- Other businesses:
- Maguysama Technologies, Douala. Specialize in the design, sale, installation and service of solar and hydroelectric products, accent lighting and renewable energy systems for residential and commercial structures.
<http://www.maguysama.free.fr/>
 - Continental Froid, Yaoundé. Assemble, repair and sell energy-efficient household electrical appliances within Cameroon.
<http://members.aol.com/nankeu/myhomepage/business.html>
6. Foreign-based tourism sites:
- <http://www.cameroun-infotourisme.com/> (Paris)
 - <http://www.cameroun-voyages.com/> (Paris)
 - <http://www.explore-africa.co.uk/> (United Kingdom)
 - <http://www.objectif-afrique.com/> (France)
7. Locally-based tourism sites:
- [French couple in Maroua offering safaris and nature excursions, combined with accommodation at locally-run establishments.](http://www.fagusvoyages.com/home/home.php)
<http://www.fagusvoyages.com/home/home.php>
 - French couple's ranch offering nature excursions and sports, Ngaounda.
<http://www.ngaoundaba.com/>
 - Local safari tours company partnered with AirFrance and Europcars.
<http://www.safartours.com/main.html>
 - "Cameroun Horizons" nature excursions.
<http://www.cameroun-plus.com/s22/index.htm>
 - Cycling, Douala.
<http://lescalebasses.free.fr/>
 - Safaris, birdwatching, tours, Yaoundé.
<http://www.camtours.org/>
 - Safaris.
<http://www.club-du-bongo.com/>
 - Safaris and hunting, accommodation, dining, West Cameroon.
<http://www.cameroon-faro-safari.com/>
 - Tours of the African forest region.
<http://www.laterite-voyages.com/>
 - Accommodation, tours, and camping in Kribi.
<http://www.vacances-kribi.sud.fr/index.php?page=accueil>
8. Hotels and Accommodation
- <http://www.cameroun-plus.com> (directory) hosts sites for Hotel Akwa Palace, Le Meridien Douala, and Hotel Sawa as well as lists of other local hotels in Cameroon.
 - Hotel Sawa, Douala.
<http://www.hotelsawa.com/autreshotels.html>
 - Hotel Repos-Rois, Douala.
<http://www.geocities.com/hotelroi/net>
 - Le Meridien, Douala.
http://www.lemeridien.com/cameroon/douala/hotel_cm1683.shtml
 - Hotel Residence La Falaise.
<http://www.doualavibes.com/lafalaise.htm>
 - Pelican Oscar luxury Hotel, Bamenda.
<http://www.cameroontrade.com/oscarworld>

Appendix B — Imports and exports

1. Import/Export sites hosted by www.cameroontrade.com
 - Trans Bourgeois Investment (Carington Dikongue, CEO). Computers and IT importers, Douala.
<http://www.cameroontrade.com/transbourgeois/>

- Goldrich Merchants Ltd, Douala. Registered importers of electronics.
<http://www.cameroontrade.com/goldrich/>
- Kumba Trading Company, Douala. Importers of cosmetics, beverages, wall covering, textiles, used shoes, clothing, bags, cars, motorcycles, sewing machines, and cell phones.
<http://www.cameroontrade.com/kumba/>
- Africa Shipping and Stevedoring Agency, Douala (Wembe Samuel, CEO). Stowing and storage. ("The only local business facing the big French corporations")
<http://www.cameroontrade.com/assa/>

2. Imports and importers

The following companies, indexed by products desired for importation, have listed advertisements on groups.google.com, www.commerce.com.tw, and/or www.globalbuyersonline.com, the latter being, exclusively, an online marketplaces for buyers and sellers. In many cases, the same companies listed similar ads on more than one Web site concurrently. A great majority of the companies are from Douala.

Electronics: DVDs, CDs, cameras, computers, peripherals, mobile phones, car parts

- Dunkans Group of Companies, Ltd.
- Rignorous Ltd., Douala
- Akiri's International Marketing Ventures
- AG Telecom Investment Sarl
- Oducam Investment, Ltd.
- ETS Maryklins Investment, Ltd.
- Chililian Trading Company
- D.Man Technologies
- Excessrich Multicreative Inc.
- Sarah and Sons
- Christian Majestic Investment
- Dedlinks Inc.
- Trusthouse Investment
- Comcat Technologies Inc.
- Thomiscan Sarl
- ETS New Age Trading
- Neal International Products
- Guy Prince Inter-Continental Sarl
- Omniserv Enterprises

Textiles, garments, and cosmetics (lingerie, used clothing, shoes, bags, jewellery)

- UCI International Ltd., Douala
- AG Telecom Investment Sarl
- Eagle Speed Services, Yaoundé
- Ndome Multi-purpose Sarl
- Afrik Merchant
- Silver International, Ltd.
- ETS Willingness Innovations, Sarl
- Afrique Sarl
- Nadine links Sarl
- Benefactor Inc, Ltd.
- Rich Foundation
- Thomiscan Sarl
- ETS Maureen Cospharma
- Agbai Flower
- Kodex Global Investment
- BFCC — Bouba Fils Cameroun Company
- British-Muslim Trading Company
- Microtex Invest, Ltd.

Fertilizer, medical equipment, fire extinguishers, water purifiers

- ETS Maureen Ventures Coy
- Towerhill Ventures, Ltd.
- Vedder Industrial Co.
- Sanisaintl
- Onamto Sarl

3. Exports and exporters

The following companies, indexed by products desired for importation, have listed advertisements on br.tradeholding.com, www.indiatradezone.com, groups.google.com, and www.commerce.com.tw. As with the list of importers above, this list is not exhaustive of all the sites which provide posting of such advertisements, but it seems to be representative of the products being exchanged between Cameroon and other global buyers.

Plants, herbs, medicines

- 2PC
- Phyttoff
- Naturelink Ltd.
- Sanitarum
- Alobi Investment

Clothing, jewelry, handicrafts

- DNT Multicom
- Synergie Corp.
- Chesis's Moon Light African Wear Fashion

Cocoa, coffee, cashews, tea, fruit, palm kernel

- Sustainable Project on Cocoa and Coffee Development
- MIDHILL Common Initiative Group
- Excessrich Multicreative Inc.
- AGICOD
- Divine Resources Ltd.
- ETS Jopez International Corporation
- Upper Banyang Cooperative Society
- Victory Ventures
- Joaik Enterprises
- Monkam Investments
- Alobi Investment

Timber, charcoal, construction materials

- Wincw/Weladji Inc.
- Cush Company
- AGICOD
- Divine Resources, Ltd.
- Groupe Ngongang et Fils
- Mega 2000
- Cam Ebony
- Masstelecom
- Victory Ventures
- Johnwoocam, Ltd.

"Exotic Pets," birds, reptiles

- Kens Ecological Woodlands
- GENYSKAM
- Undacam African Gray Parrots

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