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Two varsity students turn hobby into online business marketing platform

ICT Alex Murimi and Lawrence Mwaniki's Delisasa platform provides basic information on SMEs

BY SIMON CIURI

Two electrical engineering students were busy working on a computer programme at the University of Nairobi's playground along Harry Thuku road when we visited.

Alex Murimi and his business partner Lawrence Mwaniki's dedication has seen them set up an online business marketing platform called Delisasa, which provides basic information on small and medium ventures in the region, and connects them to potential clients.

Entrepreneurs add their outfits to Delisasa by logging in and filling information on their businesses such as location, contact details - including links to website and social media pages -, opening and closing hours and a description of what they do.

Over 120 shops are listed on the Delisasa platform which has more than 50 active users and about 2,000 monthly page views.

The duo charges business owners between Sh3,000 and Sh7,000 per month, based on annual turnover, to host information on their ventures.

Business owners, in turn, benefit from increased traffic as a result of the online exposure and marketing.

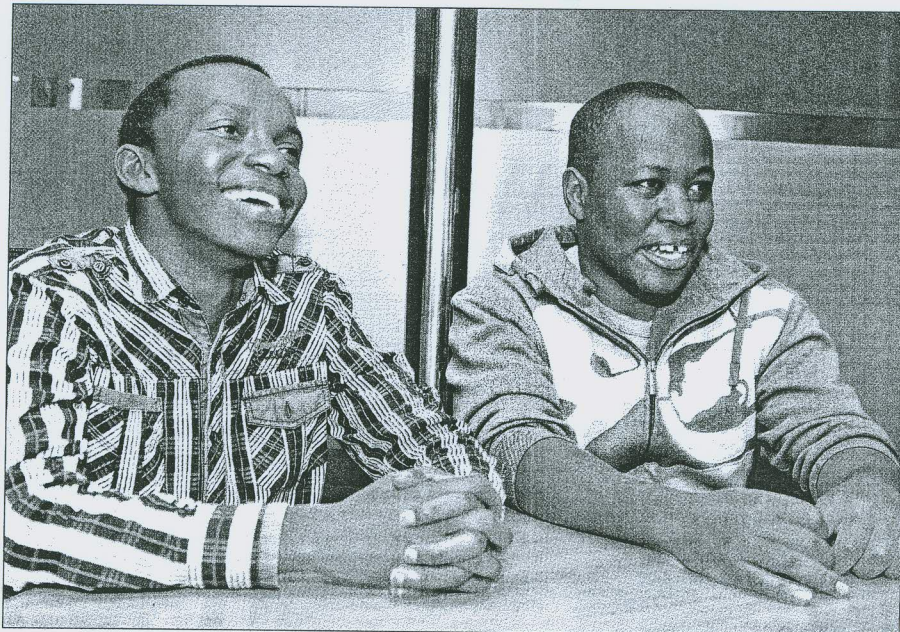
Taken root

"Our mission is to index all small businesses in order to make them more visible. More than 95 per cent of firms in Africa are small to medium and we plan to have most of them listed on Delisasa," Murimi told the *Business Daily*.

The duo, aged 21, plans to take businesses in Tanzania, Nigeria, South Africa, Tunisia and Morocco, among other African countries on board.

Online marketing targeting buyers has taken root in the local market with manufacturers using websites to popularise and sell their brands.

Last year, Internet-based retail store Jumia offered more than 8,000 items on discount during the



Lawrence Mwaniki (left) and Alex Murimi.
SALATON/NAU

sale dubbed Black Friday which targeted online shoppers. Microsoft, on the other hand, has a partnership with Jumia to drive up sales of its mobile phones through discount offers to online customers.

Last year, Strathmore University's enterprise unit ventured into the online directory business targeting small and medium enterprises keen on building brand visibility and tap into social networks.

Murimi and his partner have developed an algorithm to display popular shops and enable users access information on them more easily.

They have also categorised them for easier browsing. "Users visiting the site can search and view shops and like them. Any one can add a shop on the platform on behalf of a business owner," Murimi said.

The platform is also open to other software developers who can place applications targeting small businesses. "The latest enable users to search for a product on our

site and access shops which stocked it," said Mwaniki. The duo started the venture as a hobby, saying they felt the need to set up the platform to highlight great African businesses, mainly SMEs. The rapid penetration of the Internet motivated them to set up the portal.

"Intra-African trade will be bolstered and more industries will be created through exploration of the Internet which will create viable business innovations," said Mwaniki.

The business is yet to break even but the interest that people have shown in it has motivated them to dedicate more time and effort on it, they said.

"We know that this platform has a huge potential, but like any other business, resilience and commitment should be our guiding factors. You first make your name before profits," said Murimi.

"Our focus now is on optimising Delisasa's features and creating more to keep users coming back," he said of their short term plans.

They market Delisasa through

social media platforms, he said. They plan to enlist 500,000 businesses on the platform by the end of this year.

Their main challenge is competition from established platforms which offer similar services.

"We don't have any role models since we aspire to be the best version of ourselves. We, however, respect Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg for setting up the service at a young age and Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin for bringing an elegant web search to the world," they said.

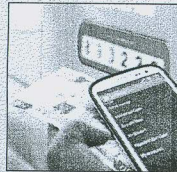
They operate the business, during their free time, from home and the University of Nairobi.

"We want to introduce a chat mechanism where enterprise owners can buy and sell their products and services through the help of a directory.

"We are building a critical mass at this level, the service will eventually be accessible through Internet-enabled phones," David Wan'gombe, the dean of students at Strathmore University's School of Management and Commerce, told the *Business Daily* during the launch of the portal.

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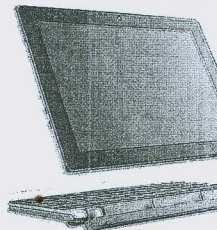
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