The World Picture
According to an internal Universal McCann mobile marketing report released last year approximately 15% of the global population bought a new phone last year. With even the bottom of the range cell phone equipped with Internet access, mobile phones have become the largest computing and Internet platform.

The research also indicates that the mobile advertising market was worth $1.4bn in 2006 and is expected to rise to $2.9bn by 2010. No surprise then that mobile Internet access is something that every major player is pursuing. Interested partners include the major search engines, cell phone manufacturers as well as cellular operators. Google has brought out its Android mobile Internet platform and Yahoo followed suit with its Yahoo Go! model.

Hello Africa
Romeo Kumalo, Vodacom South Africa’s commercial executive director estimates that mobile media adspend in South Africa could reach R1.5 billion by 2011. Other African countries are also avidly adopting cellular technology and the Internet, with Nigeria leading the continent when it comes to mobile growth.

Wireless Internet access seems to be a logical choice for Africa as mobile phones outnumber PCs and in many countries there are more mobile phones than fixed lines. People who may not be able to write fluently or use a computer are still incredibly savvy with a cell phone.

Some predictions:
• More emphasis from African governments of the economic importance of Internet access.
• Competition and technological development to lower costs and increase access across Africa.
• Applications such as commodity prices and transportation schedules.
• The development of voice recognition would be useful in countries with a high level of illiteracy.
• Citizens in developing countries tend not to have credit cards nor qualify for one. Mobile phones could be used as mobile wallets with Internet purchases deducted from mobile bills or pre-paid balances.
• Long commuting times means that inexpensive Internet surfing may catch on as the perfect time killer.

MediaOpportunities
At present despite better handsets, mobile Internet is more toll road than superhighway, with providers paying their dues to make this service more affordable and user friendly. Yet, just as the Internet was once prohibitively expensive, rates for mobile Internet access will also come down. Just as consumers had to become accustomed to using a computer, it will take some time before consumers embrace the Internet.

Perhaps critics who refer to cell phones’ poor functionality are missing the point. Just as newspapers and magazines are both print media yet offer something quite different, mobile Internet access has a different role to play from the computer Internet access. There are things that the Internet offers that mobile doesn’t and vice versa.

Some predictions:
• Like all digital options, media planners have to move away from the idea that new media is a campaign add-on - new media if executed effectively can be at the core of a campaign.
• Advertising as entertainment. Great adverts, whether humorous, thought-provoking or striking will be forwarded at the touch of the send button.
• Permission marketing is crucial. Mobile has much to offer marketers – it is ubiquitous, personal, immediate and involving. For the same reasons, marketers should be especially careful about interrupting or affecting the quality of each consumer’s mobile experience.
• Expect cell phone adverts to boom. Here the power is truly in the hands of the consumer; traditional advertising ‘pushes’ the message to the consumer while mobile advertising ‘pulls’, the consumer ‘pulls’ the advertising they are interested in.
• Email services will also grow. An SMS message costs cents and sending the same message to 1000 people multiplies this costs quite considerably. In the case of e-mail, one message on a GPRS network costs about 1 cent and does not cost more if the message has a thousand recipients.
• Digital fatigue. It’s inevitable that people will reject being always contactable.
• A free lunch? Possibly. Eric Schmidt the CEO of Google has gone on the record saying that ultimately mobile carriers will make services free in return for being able to target them with advertising.

The author is General Manager of Universal McCann South Africa