

Interview with Sandra Baron about the Reasons for the Slow Development of the Mobile Internet in Germany

Since 1999, Sandra Baron has been involved in the introduction of mobile data services, for example with KPN Mobile and Vodafone Switzerland. Arnd Weber conducted this interview with her in Karlsruhe, Germany, on October 26, 2010. The interview was conducted in German, and a video of it is available at http://www.itas.kit.edu/iut_lp_webe09_nunet.php. The text of the interview was edited slightly for this English version to improve its readability.

Arnd: Hello Sandra. When did you first get involved in the mobile Internet?

Sandra: Back in 1999 I built the first WAP and web portal for a small service provider. It was even listed among the top ten WAP sites by T-Mobile.

Arnd: Ah. Since the beginning of the iPhone age, the media have given wide coverage to the mobile Internet and use of the Internet on mobile phones. In the period from 1999 to 2002 you tried to help make the mobile Internet, mobile surfing, and mobile e-mails a success. Why didn't it work better back then?

Sandra: In the period from 1999 to 2002, well, that was the time when WAP stood more for "wait and pay." On the one hand, you simply could not get unlimited access to data. The classic payment model was to pay per WAP minute. Financially, it wasn't sustainable.

In addition to network availability and the speed of data delivery, the obstacles on the part of the net providers were so great that the entire matter developed very, very slowly, leaving—unfortunately, from my point of view—a very, very negative footprint, a very negative impression on end users to this very day. Even in the last few years, users have repeatedly been very skeptical when they have confronted the topic of mobile surfing, of the mobile Internet. "Access to my account, how much do I pay," it isn't clear what the payment model is. I can recall that I had interviews with users who said, "Suddenly I hit this button on my mobile phone and a globe appeared"—at the time, symbol for GPRS and now for UMTS connections—without having done anything. Overcome with anxiety, they quickly pressed the stop button. From my perspective, these were the biggest obstacles. Also the lack of transparency concerning the payment models of the service providers.

Arnd: Back then, I think, you worked for several providers—e-Plus, KPM, and Vodafone in Switzerland. Were there any plans then to push mobile e-mails at a lower price than that for SMS text messaging?

Sandra: The whole issue became a topic, of course, when i-mode was introduced in Europe. At the time I was working for KPM Mobile and, together with NTT DoCoMo, brought i-mode to Europe. Obviously, the status of e-mail was very different on i-mode phones. The discussion turned to the question of how e-mail would cannibalize our SMS text messaging model, use of which was widespread in Europe, including in Germany. I can recall that it was discussed intensely. We also discussed the pricing of e-mails. Ultimately the conclusion was reached to hide it in the phone's user interface and not to make it as simple and user friendly to use as text messaging. Because service providers naturally considered the field of text messaging to be a cash cow in the years between 2002 and 2009, just as they still do.

Arnd: Has this changed with the advent of the iPhone? In other words, are Internet standards now becoming normal in mobile communication? Is text messaging going to disappear sometime? What do you think?

Sandra: Well, those are two questions.

To the first question: The introduction of the iPhone has of course changed things. For me, this was the second big revolution in mobile communication that did not come from the mobile market but from a computer

manufacturer. The first was i-mode, and the second the iPhone. Things have changed in the sense that access both to one's own e-mails as well as to business e-mails is significantly easier via the iPhone in the—what I would call—private user market. Obviously, usability is the biggest factor. And in the business world—also with the Blackberry and RIM's software—e-mail has a different status.

Nonetheless, turning to your second question, when I consider whether this will ever change, even today I still see the point in my and in the iPhone user interface: It takes one, *one* click, one movement of the hand, and I can see my text message. I can read it. I press once and I can send an answer. With e-mails the situation is: I have to access my e-mailbox, to open the e-mail, to press on “answer”, and finally once again to send the e-mail. At the very least there are thus four movements, four actions that I have to carry out.

That is to say that sometime a service provider or a technology provider would have to consider organizing access to e-mail in a user interface in such a simple manner in terms of usability as with text messaging.

Arnd: If you were to imagine that people would use e-mail instead of text messaging, what would that mean for surfing and for the content industry?

Sandra: Well, that would be an enormous relief for the mobile industry and for the content industry, very simply because it means “one click to content” functionality, which can only be achieved very, very imprecisely with conventional SMS WAP push. For one thing, in terms of simplicity, WAP push functionality still lags a little behind. Where do I get the WAP push link? Where can I call up the WAP push link? I have to go from the WAP push menu into that for the mobile Internet. All of these are actions that are not necessary when I receive a mobile e-mail, click on the link, and—as in the case of the iPhone—the Safari browser opens automatically and I can continue. That is good for the entire content industry, as we can see in Japan. Why does i-mode function so well in Japan? Precisely because I have this one click to content functionality. And in addition to a user being available via e-mail, there is a similar function of using a barcode reader to trigger an e-mail push, thus having one click to content. It is simply something very different from the onerous “www.now type the URL.com”.

Arnd: Sandra, thank you very much. Do you have any advice for Europeans and the European mobile phone industry?

Sandra: Yes, my advice is the same: Keep it simple and stupid. Have simple price models that are easy for customers to understand. Just as an example here let me mention the successful fitness chain McFit. It has a single price and uniform opening hours. What would be the consequence if I would try using this model of success in mobile communications?

Arnd: Okay, thanks again!

Sandra: Anytime!