

Why uAfrica's eCommerce Awards have been put on hold

 By Jessica Taylor

25 Apr 2016

The eCommerce Awards have been put on hold for 2016, so I thought I'd interview the organiser to find out why...

"We have thought long and hard about the way we evaluate the winners of the eCommerce Awards, and will be changing the way that we choose winners," explains Mario Toscano, client relationship manager of uAfrica. "We are also discussing how to expand the categories that we adjudicate for the awards, and may potentially partner other events to make the awards bigger and better. It's all in the planning phase right now."

[uAfrica](#) is a technology company that provides cloud-based e-commerce services to SMEs across Africa.



Mario Toscano

Here, Toscano goes into more detail on other projects the company is focusing on and, on a broader level, discusses the state of e-commerce in SA, its growth over the last 10 years and the impact of technology on the sector in SA and Africa at large...

■ According to the [website](#), this year you're focusing on 'building e-commerce tools to make e-commerce in South Africa even better'. Please explain.

Well, multi-channel or omni-channel retail is a big focus for our partner Shopify in other parts of the world. In line with this we have built our uAfrica Multichannel product, which allows Shopify merchants to sync their product and order information between their Shopify store and bidorbuy, or other Shopify stores. Shopify currently integrates into Facebook, as well as into Shopify POS. With the addition of bidorbuy as a sales channel, SA merchants are sure to get more exposure earlier, and get more sales sooner in a more South African context.

We are also looking at adding more channels like Takealot.com and, perhaps, some of the other African marketplaces.

We have also built a uAfrica Custom Shipping Zones, which is a Shopify app that allows merchants to present rates to their customers on checkout, based on the customer's South African post code. This app is now available in the Shopify app store.

In addition to the above, we have also just completed our most exciting product: uAfrica Shipping, which is a revolutionary shipping tool that will allow our merchants to get orders booked out for delivery quickly while keeping the customer informed on the status of his shipment. What's more, we have negotiated special rates with our courier partners to offer the best possible rates to our merchants. Now, our merchants can ship any order directly from within their uAfrica dashboard without hassle, and keep their customers in the loop about their orders at any time.

■ Are there any other project(s) you're working on?

We are working to add other sales channels to our multi-channel product, and on adding features to uAfrica Shipping for our merchants. We are also engaging with Shopify to bring the platform to other African countries soon too.

The South African eCommerce Awards celebrated its tenth year in 2015. Comment on the journey so far.

Looking back, I think the journey of the awards runs parallel to the journey of e-commerce in South Africa. At the start, e-commerce was largely unknown and there were a handful of people getting it right. As a result the adjudication and execution of the awards was simple. It's no longer a case of the site looking good and the buyer receiving his order on

time.

Right now, the spotlight is on e-commerce, so that means that running an event like the eCommerce Awards is much more difficult and we need to start adjudicating based on more complex aspects of entrants, like customer service, delivery condition and contact-ability, etc.

I think the best years for the awards still lie ahead, but our eCommerce Conference/Awards ceremony combination were some of the highlights of the past 10 years of the awards. We have also built up incredible relationships with some of SA's best e-commerce providers, from courier companies, to platforms, and marketplaces and those relationships have been useful to help us all understand the sector.

■ **In your opinion, what is the current state of e-commerce in SA?**

E-commerce is full steam ahead. People from all walks have realised that selling online is a viable way to start or expand a business. Online merchants are faced with very unique hurdles with online sales, and they are tackling them with gusto. There is an incredible optimism among online merchants.

There is definitely a growing audience of shoppers turning to the internet for their shopping needs, and these shoppers are spending more year-on-year online, which is encouraging. Deeper internet penetration and ease of access to the internet are helping this along the way, as are smartphones. Smartphones are shaping, and will continue to shape, the future of e-commerce too, and we will continue to see more people adopting technology to help them get smaller tasks done - including shopping.

What is particularly interesting to us is the number of niche, artisanal products available online, which are selling incredibly well online. We see all sorts of great handmade products like leather goods, jewellery, toys and other crafted products being successfully marketed on Shopify in SA. On the other side of the spectrum, we are starting to see the bigger retailers realising that they need to be online too, which is exciting.

■ **Comment on the growth of e-commerce over the last 10 years.**

Growth has been phenomenal over the past few years for sure. In the early 2000s growth was slow as e-commerce was a new concept, but it has been accelerating over the past few years. Last year, we saw figures of around 35% growth from 2014 and, this year, the sector is estimated to grow by around 30%, to a total worth of around R9 billion.

By global standards we are certainly a small market for e-commerce, but I think in years to come we will start catching up and our e-commerce sector will become more mature. Something to bear in mind is that e-commerce is very difficult to measure, strictly speaking. In some cases, sales may not happen online directly, but a shopper may purchase a product as a result of a Facebook post or an online classified advert. Is that sale then attributed to e-commerce? I think we need to see e-commerce more as a tool for sales as well as a medium for sales, and the data for both is very encouraging.

■ **How does uAfrica.com fit into the e-commerce sector, in SA and Africa? And what impact does it have on the sector?**

Our primary role as uAfrica.com is as a technology company. We want to build great tools to help merchants sell their products online both here in South Africa, and in Africa at large. We already provide a world-class platform through our partnership with Shopify, and we are working to make e-commerce the same as the needs of Europeans or Americans, but we can take their solutions and adapt them to suit our unique needs. That's where uAfrica.com comes in. We specialise in helping people succeed with their online stores - and we look to technology to do that.

■ **Why do you think it's important to recognise/reward those South African websites that have demonstrated excellence in their use of the internet as a platform for e-commerce?**

We recognise the best South African websites because they deserve to be recognised and because they are doing things that are groundbreaking and innovative. It's a great opportunity for other online store owners to learn some lessons from those stores that are making their online stores successful. Additionally, the awards help the sector as a whole with awareness about online shopping. In conjunction with the awards, we run a survey in which we ask online shoppers about their experiences shopping online, and measure their responses to previous years. This allows us to present this information to online store owners, so that they are aware of the public's perception of e-commerce and can take steps to address any perception problem areas. I think this is an important function of what we do with the awards too.

■ **Anything you'd like to add?**

It is now easier and more affordable than ever for anybody to create a business. Technology has come a long way to serve the needs of business owners, old and new, to help their businesses succeed. Business owners should no longer be asking themselves if they should start selling online. They should be asking: How can I sell online?

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