

New TooMuchWifi CEO Tauriq Brown aims to help close SA's digital divide



By Imran Salie

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At the beginning of March, wireless internet service provider TooMuchWifi announced that it appointed Tauriq Brown to replace its cofounder Ian Thomson as CEO. TooMuchWifi started in the Western Cape in 2016 with the goal of providing affordable fibre-backed internet connection to all South Africans. The company currently has a presence in over 40 under-resourced communities, and over 400,000 customers, growing at a consistent monthly rate of 10%.



New TooMuchWifi CEO Tauriq Brown | image supplied

Brown, who grew up in the township of Manenberg in Cape Town, is a venture builder who has previously scaled startups in record times, having started and successfully sold ventures for Rocket Internet, the global internet and tech incubator with a market cap of \$3.7bn, including an exit to Alibaba.com, the Chinese online retail giant.

He was recruited out of Stellenbosch University upon getting his Bachelor's Degree in Commerce, Financial Planning and Investment Management, then transitioned into a cofounder and managing director role at Rocket Internet. This opportunity allowed him to travel to various parts of the world, including Vietnam, Thailand, South East Asia, and many others.

He has been exposed to unique opportunities with digital tech companies at an early stage, signing exclusive partnerships with Nokia, Pepsi and Uber - to name a few.

Bizcommunity caught up with Brown to find out more about him, TooMuchWifi, and his new role as CEO.

■ Congratulations on your appointment. How are you feeling about it?

In two words: pretty amazing! It's an absolute pleasure to be entrusted with the responsibility of leading this company. A

company I have been searching for many years where commercial and social interests don't compete but rather complement each other.

▣ ***What kind of approach will you be taking in this new role?***

My experience starting and scaling businesses abroad has exposed me to different industries, geographies and cultures. I am confident that my past experience has equipped me with a solid foundation to succeed in this role and positions us most perfectly to seize this unique opportunity.

As a nation, we must ensure that everyone has equal access to the benefits of the internet because without connectivity, people fall behind and the digital divide becomes an economic divide. We started TooMuchWifi in 2016 to bring high-quality, reliable and affordable internet to underserved communities at a time when nobody else was focusing on this market. We always believed that connectivity is a human right, and everybody deserves to be connected.

In 2022, we made the decision to slash prices by 43% to make our Wi-Fi even more affordable to more people. And later this month, we will be making another exciting announcement around our pricing that will put our Wi-Fi within reach of even more South Africans.

Bringing affordable internet to all Africans is a huge undertaking, and I couldn't be more excited and proud to be at the forefront of leading this effort.

▣ ***Tell us about your goals as TooMuchWifi's new CEO...***

One of the biggest challenges communities face is the feeling of being cut off from the rest of the world. TooMuchWifi's aim is to mitigate that feeling by providing affordable high-speed internet access to lower LSM communities - connecting the unconnected to the rest of the world.



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We are currently operating within the Western Cape, and our goal is to expand and grow sustainably into various other provinces within South Africa. A lack of affordable internet connection is not only an issue faced in South Africa, but across Africa too, as the continent has one of the highest data rates in the world. We want to continue our mission of bridging the connectivity gap and bringing affordable internet to lower LSMs across Africa, and who knows, even the world.

▣ ***How do you intend to accelerate TooMuchWifi's growth across Africa and South Africa?***

TooMuchWifi's journey started in 2016, well before I arrived. It all began when one of the company's cofounders wanted to

assist his household employee with affordable internet access in her home. This idea led to further investigation and it showed that, on average, a suburban person was paying roughly 0.2% of their income on internet access, whereas those in communities were spending about 24% of their income to access the internet.

We will continue to make use of our current strategy, which is community relationship-based. We establish connections with community council members, which help us develop an understanding of how we can assist them. We then introduce Hotspots throughout the community, and from there we upgrade to uncapped line installations within the homes of the community residents.

We will always take the opportunity to identify and enter into a community that does not seem like a viable market opportunity to others. This will give the communities we serve the opportunity to develop into a self-sufficient, upskilled community - meeting educational needs, stimulating economic growth, and retaining our customers.

■ ***What persuaded you to return to South Africa to take up the position of CEO for TooMuchWifi?***

When I was evaluating my next career move, I was considering opportunities worldwide. I was looking for an organisation where I could make an impact, and it needed to be something grand and bigger than myself.

When I came across TooMuchWifi, I knew instantly that there was a match. I have rarely seen a company that has a for-profit approach matched equally by their focus on having social impact. It was clear to me that revenue and impact metrics were both important to the TooMuchWifi leadership team and the board. I evaluated the company's claim of reinvesting 30% of its revenue into the communities it serves, and I found out that they are actually investing even more than that. TooMuchWifi is a well-positioned and beautiful brand with sophisticated software and proprietary technology stack, which further made it a no-brainer for me to join the company.



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TooMuchWifi serves a purpose close to my heart, and it operates in communities much like my own - I grew up in Manenberg, a township community in Cape Town. Knowing what internet access has done for me personally, and getting the opportunity to lead this fantastic company, has given me a sense of purpose beyond commercial ambitions. We have a chance to fundamentally change people's lives, and I have been entrusted with the keys to this rocketship - I couldn't be more excited to make it fly.

■ ***TooMuchWifi recently attracted a blend of debt and equity funding from the Mineworkers Investment Company. How does this position the company to scale and expand operations across the country and into Africa?***

MIC is an incredible strategic partner for TooMuchWifi. Their funding has provided a solid foundation to build our company's growth. MIC's support will enable TooMuchWifi to drive expansion and growth into further communities within the Western Cape and across South Africa and greater Africa. Building an internet service provider is a capital-intensive business, and this funding is critical for us to expand our network, make capital investments in hardware, and hire more staff at all levels of the business to drive expansion and exceptional customer service.

■ ***What do you love most about your career and the industry you are in?***

What I love most about my career and the industry is the opportunity to be at the forefront of technological innovation and advancements. Being part of a sector that constantly strives to improve and evolve, to develop new technologies and solutions to solve complex problems, is incredibly exciting and rewarding.

By providing fast and reliable internet access, we can connect communities and businesses, facilitate access to

information and education, and enable people to work and communicate effectively, no matter where they are in the world. This can have a profound impact on people's lives.

■ ***Please comment on the importance of affordable connectivity for poorer communities***

We believe internet access is a basic human right yet only 25% of Africans have access to this basic essential. Of that quarter of the population that is lucky enough to be online, a large portion is paying unsustainably high prices. You can now see the opportunities available to us, our ambition matches the scale of those opportunities. Bringing affordable internet to all Africans is a huge undertaking, and I couldn't be more excited and proud to be at the forefront, leading this effort.

The internet creates incredible opportunities for people who have access to it. Personally, it has allowed me the opportunity to build internet companies all over the world where I saw firsthand how it allowed people to become self-sufficient. But those without connectivity are missing out, and they are being marginalised as key elements of modern life are out of their reach.

The internet is a storage hub for information, and having access to the internet opens up the world to its users. It does this through providing economic empowerment. The internet provides job opportunities, online training and educational courses, and the ability to start and run a business. By providing access to the internet, we can help people in underserved communities gain the skills and knowledge they need to become economically self-sufficient.



Tauriq Brown with a customer | image supplied

The internet can also be an essential tool for healthcare. Access to the internet can provide people with health information, online consultations, and telemedicine services. This is especially critical in underserved communities where access to healthcare is limited.

The pandemic resulted in an estimated 750,000 children having dropped out of school because of a lack of access to remote education. In today's digital age, access to the internet is vital for students to access educational resources, research information, and complete homework assignments. Without internet access, students from low-income and underserved communities are at a disadvantage, which can lead to a lack of educational opportunities and poorer

outcomes.

The internet also provides a way for people to connect with family and friends, access social media, and stay informed about news and events. In today's world, the internet is a crucial tool for social connection, and denying people access to it can lead to social isolation and exclusion.

📺 *Take us through a day in the life of Tauriq Brown*

I prefer to start my days early and get a headstart before my team arrives at the office. My days are filled with lots of meetings, but I try to squeeze in a casual conversation with my staff in between. Connecting with our junior team members is particularly important to me - they carry the weight of our company on their shoulders.

I'm a numbers guy and expansion plans come with lots of number crunching and budget calculations, so that's where I spend most of my time right now - luckily it's my happy place.

I regularly join our team in the field as well. The other day, I joined them at an activation in Khayelitsha, and I always enjoy the energy our community team brings along.

After work, I try to get a long run in and spend time with my wife and two-year-old daughter. Having just moved back to Cape Town from abroad, I enjoy exploring beautiful Cape Town with my family and friends.

ABOUT IMRAN SALIE

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