

COMPETITION

What makes the “Best” mobile network? A South African perspective

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Choosing the "best" mobile network depends on multiple factors. In practice, it is rarely defined by a single metric. It has been suggested that for consumers, "best" ought to be a network that most closely matches their needs – in coverage, speed, reliability, customer service and cost – rather than the one with the fastest headline speed or fanciest advertisements.

How "Best" is measured

Industry analysts and regulators use a variety of metrics to assess network quality.

Independent firms like Opensignal and local research platforms use crowd-sourced data on download/upload speeds, latency, signal availability, and consistency tests to rank networks^[1].

However, these objective benchmarks tell only part of the story. Consumer surveys and satisfaction indices emphasise qualitative factors. For example, one South African index found that "softer" elements (like perceived value-for-money and quality of customer relationships) were key drivers of satisfaction, even as raw network performance became a "hygiene factor".

Key factors shaping perception

Coverage and Signal Availability

A network's geographic reach and signal strength are fundamental. Operators now publicly track "coverage experience". For example, Vodacom earned an overall coverage score of 8.0 out of 10 (the country's best) and won the 5G coverage award in 2025. Likewise, Telkom's network achieved a 99.1% "signal availability" rate (time with at least 3G/4G), far higher than competitors.

Network Speed & Performance

Speed remains a headline factor, especially as media streaming, gaming and large uploads become routine. Recent data show South African mobile "average download speeds of ~67 Mbps", with MTN (~82 Mbps) and Vodacom (~77 Mbps) leading the pack. Importantly, 5G networks drive much higher top speeds. Is this important? The answer is yes: these differences can matter. A heavy streamer or gamer will notice 200+ Mbps vs 30 Mbps.

It is, however, essential to note that peak speeds depend on location (urban vs rural), network congestion, and device capability.

Reliability and Consistency

A network that is fast only occasionally, or drops calls during storms or power outages, will not feel "best" to users. Reliability covers call drop rates, latency stability and uptime. South Africa's electricity shortages have made this especially salient. For example, MTN invested over R10 billion in its network (including advanced batteries and generators) to ensure "continuous service during load-shedding". In performance awards, Vodacom recently won the "Consistent Quality" category (highest share of tests meeting demanding app thresholds) for multiple reporting periods. In practical terms, consumers view reliability through experience: Does the network drop calls in your home? Is video streaming glitchy? In short, high average speed means little if your service is patchy.

Emerging trends shaping the future of "Best"

The mobile landscape is evolving rapidly, so what counts as "best" today may shift in the next few years. Key trends to watch include:

5G Expansion (and Beyond). Consumers with 5G-capable phones now see speeds in the hundreds of Mbps. In the near future, networks will continue upgrading spectrum and infrastructure. As 5G devices become ubiquitous, "latency", "IoT connectivity", and "new applications" (AR/VR, cloud gaming) may become key differentiators. Choosing the "best" network may increasingly depend on 5G availability and on whether an operator can deliver on next-gen use cases (e.g. supporting smart factories or self-driving cars).

Satellite and Multi-Orbit Networks. Traditionally, mobile coverage has been terrestrial. That's changing as satellite connectivity blends in. For example, Vodacom announced a partnership to integrate SpaceX Starlink's low-Earth-orbit (LEO) satellites into its network. This hybrid approach means remote areas (or ships at sea) might get a cell signal routed via satellite when ground towers are unreachable. In practice, this could make the "best" network one with true national (or even pan-continental) reach via both cellular and satellite networks. Over time, when satellites deliver low-latency 4G/5G directly to handsets, even standard mobile plans may cover far-flung bushveld roads.

Network Innovation (AI, Open RAN, Virtualisation). Networks themselves are undergoing technological transformation. Operators are adopting AI-driven optimisation (self-healing networks, predictive maintenance) and virtualised RAN architectures. In South Africa, while large operators still build traditional 3G/4G/5G networks, it should be expected that these back-end improvements will improve service without apparent customer effort – for example, faster recovery from faults. For tech-centric consumers, a "best" network might one day be judged by cutting-edge features like network slicing or guaranteed enterprise SLAs.

Conclusion

In an era where mobile connectivity has become as essential as electricity, the quest for the "best mobile network" consumes countless consumer hours and generates endless marketing claims. Yet this seemingly straightforward pursuit masks a fundamental truth: there is no universally "best" mobile network—only the network that best serves a consumer's individual needs, usage patterns, and priorities.

Happy holidays surfing the web, streaming content, gaming, and making holiday calls on *your best network!*

Note that the author relied heavily on MyBroadband articles reports written during 2024 and 2025 in the preparation of the article. In the interest of brevity, all MyBroadband articles have not been footnoted.

[1] Opensignal's recent national study illustrates MTN is dominating the leaderboard, winning 11 of 15 experience awards (including all overall experience categories).



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