

The Mobile Experience: An Essential Consideration for Website Initiatives

Increasingly, the first place people turn to when they need information is their phone. What time is a movie playing? How do I get to a friend's house? Where's the best place to buy new jeans? Did my package arrive? Once upon a time we turned to our computer for answers. Today those answers are in our pocket and with us all day, every day. If you use the Internet to communicate with your customers, suppliers, employees or peers then you need to think about the mobile experience you are offering because that's the first place people will turn to find you.

Any company considering a new website, or the redesign of an existing website, needs to add mobile into the equation. With customer engagement being the “holy grail” for most companies, limiting access to your website by not providing a mobile experience is a lost opportunity.

Ensuring your web presence is accessible from a variety of devices can be complex. Just as the proliferation of browser alternatives to Microsoft's Internet Explorer means companies need to consider and test the user experience of their website in Chrome, Firefox and Safari browsers, it is becoming equally important to consider the user experience of websites on smartphones, tablets and smart televisions.

This article outlines key considerations to ensure your audience can connect with you anytime, anywhere.



Tablet vs. Phone

Before we discuss mobile experience options, let's define mobile. Some group tablets with mobile technologies and some don't. On the one hand a tablet is obviously a portable device that many carry with them all the time. However, the same can be said of ultra-light laptops. Like a laptop, tablets have relatively large screens and are generally capable of delivering the full Internet experience just as a PC would. In fact, people's view of this topic is constantly evolving. When the iPad launched, Mark Zuckerberg was asked if Facebook would be producing an iPad app, and at the time, he replied that he didn't consider tablets mobile, suggesting that the best way to use Facebook on the iPad was through the browser. Later, Facebook decided to make their iOS app universal, optimizing the app experience for the tablet.



The biggest design consideration for tablets is the fact that users interact with a website through touch events rather than mouse events.



Regardless of the category within which tablets are placed, a key consideration for any web development is Adobe Flash support. Unlike the smartphone space where Android now has a slight market share edge over iOS, the Apple iPad has managed to maintain a dominate market share in the tablet space. Since the iPad doesn't support Flash, it is important to avoid the use of Flash if you want to provide a good experience for the majority of tablet users.



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Given the power of HTML5, there are really no trade-offs when it comes to eschewing Flash in site development, except as it pertains to legacy Flash apps. When it comes to user experience HTML5 delivers as much or more than Flash. Moving from Flash to HTML5 is also following a trend which should future proof your website. When the iPad first launched, 90% of video on the web was served up using Flash. By the time Apple launched the successor to the iPad 2 that number had dropped to under 50%.

Flash, however, is not the only consideration when building a site that considers both tablet and desktop users. The biggest design consideration for tablets is the fact that users interact with a website through touch events rather than mouse events. Providing a good site experience for tablet users can often be as simple as avoiding mouse-over hover events and ensuring that all the links and buttons on the site are easy to read and touch. Don't make your buttons too small. Don't group your buttons too closely together.



If up-front design consideration is given to the tablet experience there should be minimal development costs involved with delivering a site that works equally well for tablet and desktop users. The main cost consideration is the additional scope of testing the site on tablet-specific browsers.

Phones on the other hand have a limiting factor based on screen size. A website that looks good on a desktop can render equally well on a tablet with no loss of readability or usability. This is often not true when it comes to rendering the same site on a phone. Because of the reduced screen real estate, special layout considerations need to be made for a site to be easy to use and navigate on a phone.

On the whole, modern phone browsers do a good job of handling the Internet at full force, but there is a big difference between fumbling your way through a website on your phone and experiencing a website optimized for a smaller screen – where reading and navigation are easy and require no special effort. The latter is a site that users will readily come back to on their phone.

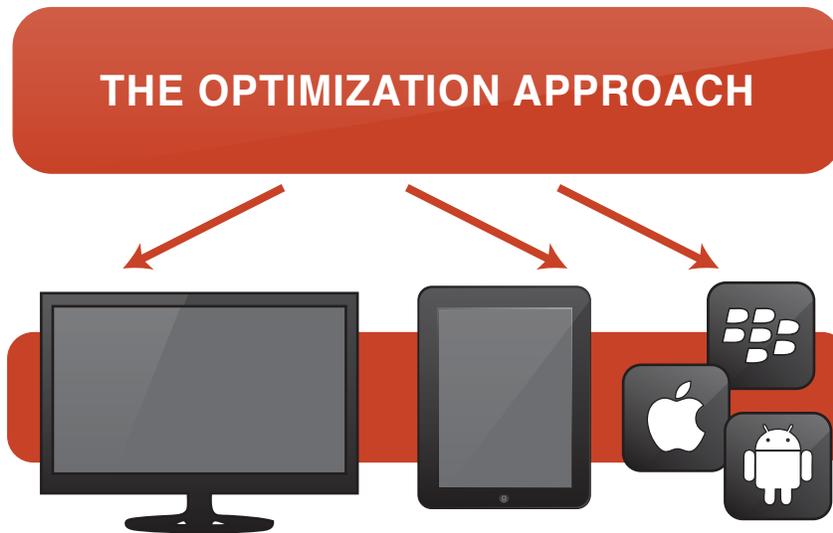


The Importance of the Mobile Experience

Mobile is often an afterthought for companies contemplating a new website. It's something people think can be left for a later project phase and they ignore the mobile experience as they roll out their new web presence.

The problem is, ignoring the smartphone experience of your website means ignoring the device that most people have with them all the time. According to a study published by Google in May of 2012, 60% of smartphone users use their devices to access the Internet and 79% never leave home without them. It's with us at work and at home. The smartphone is the device many of us look at first thing in the morning and check right before bed. In fact, Google reports that 81% of smartphone users use their phones while doing other things, including watching TV (51%).

Given the ubiquity of smartphones and the fact that their small screen size requires special attention, what follows are two practical approaches for ensuring a positive mobile experience, thereby giving your site the broadest possible reach.



The Optimization Approach: Mobile Optimize Your Entire Site

The first approach is to optimize your entire website for mobile. Essentially, this involves taking the entire site and creating custom layouts appropriate for small screen, touch and non-touch enabled devices. The idea is that regardless of whether someone comes to the site from a phone, a tablet or a desktop computer, the content is the same and only the layout changes to accommodate the special needs of the small screen and touch devices.

There are a few advantages with this approach. First, it simplifies the content management, since all the content will be targeted for desktop, tablet and phone, rather than having to manage which channels content should be targeted towards. Second, it also simplifies some aspects of the project management of the website build. The site build can still be treated as a single project with one development team focused on a single deliverable. There will, however, be added complexity for the team as they will need to manage and test how every page of the site performs on a broader range of devices and they will have to develop template phone layouts for all the content.

This approach will appeal to certain segments of customers looking for the full Internet experience on their phone. Some smartphone users (often power users who tend to be influencers) use their phone interchangeably with their laptop, tablet or desktop computers and prefer websites that allow them do everything they want to do regardless of how they get to the site. Mobile optimizing your entire website is an ideal approach for this audience.

Mobile optimizing your entire website also lends itself well to the idea of creating a common mobile design that works on all the major mobile platforms. Users browsing the site are looking for a satisfactory mobile experience but won't necessarily be expecting a native-like experience. This means it's okay if the site looks the same on an iPhone as it does on an Android phone, because it's still just a website. The value comes from providing additional depth of content that is easy to navigate and not focusing on providing an app-like experience.



Delivering a mobile experience tailored to specific mobile operating systems enables you to provide a best in class mobile browsing experience that drives customer loyalty and repeat visits.



The Segmented Approach: Create a Distinct Mobile Experience

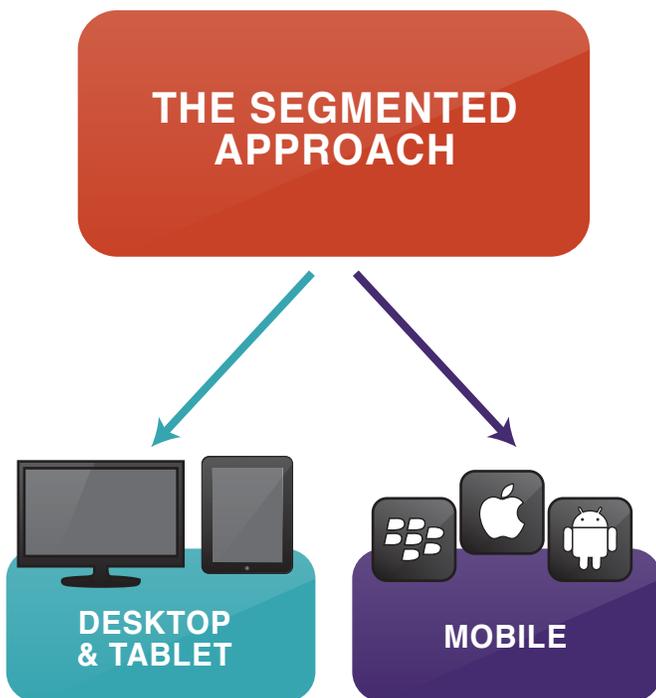
An alternative approach is to create two distinct website experiences: one for desktop and tablet users and one for mobile phones.

The key advantage of this approach is the ability to tailor the content and experience. For some website projects it's easy to imagine that most users will not be interested in the majority of content on their phone. But for other websites, much more of the content may, in fact, be ideally suited for phone users. Tailoring the site experience for mobile and non-mobile users allows more control over what content is pushed to different audiences and device types. It allows control over what prominence certain content is given to phone users versus desktop users.

For example, imagine a retail chain with locations all across the city. The main website may provide everything from job postings people can apply to online, to a store locator function that shows customers the closest retail location. The online job application process may not suit a smartphone, but the store locator is ideal for mobile.

Creating a distinct mobile experience for smartphones allows the development team to completely ignore the online job application function as it pertains to mobile, while at the same time giving the store locator function more prominence on the home page for those on the go. Rapidly directing users to the functions of the site that offer most value will drive repeat visits and brand engagement.

This approach requires more planning up front and more complexity on the content management side, since content needs to be targeted for mobile or desktop or both. While this necessitates more up-front planning on the information architecture side and back-end development, in some ways it simplifies the front-end development. Developers only have to worry about how the site works on the desktop and tablet computers for most content with only a subset of content that needs to be written and tested for phones. In this approach the mobile-targeted content can have a generic mobile design, but there is also the opportunity to target the design for each of the major mobile platforms. Delivering a mobile experience tailored to specific mobile operating systems enables you to provide a best-in-class mobile browsing experience that drives customer loyalty and repeat usage.



Other Considerations

1. The App Store Advantage

Any commercial website project should focus on engaging with customers, peers and suppliers. Almost every company has a presence on the web and the first thing a site does is make a statement about that company. Delivering value to visitors will result in increased traffic and therefore higher engagement. When we think about the reasons for launching a website, consideration should be given to developing a native app for each of the major platforms.

There is a certain segment who prefer native apps to mobile browsing. These people are active on their devices, tend to be early adopters, and often represent influencers within their peer group. These users also turn to their device app store when seeking new ways to get the most out of their phone. Each smartphone operating system (OS) includes an app allowing users to find and download new apps (e.g. the App Store, BlackBerry App World, Google Play). Having a presence in these app stores is another way customers can discover you.



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Providing a native app offers the opportunity to take advantage of push notifications. Once users download your app, you can push messages to those users, even when they are not running your app, thereby giving you a new channel of communication. This alone can make the cost of native development worthwhile.





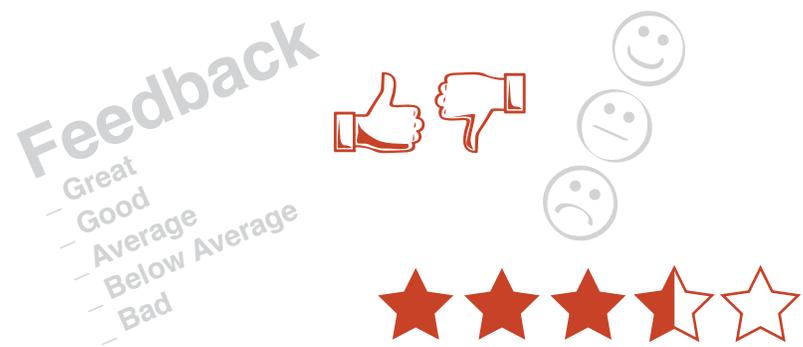
2. Focus on Delivering Value

Whether you decide to mobile optimize your website, create a targeted mobile site or build native apps to take advantage of the various app stores, never lose sight of who is going to use your new site or app. Make sure you understand your customers and focus on delivering real value for them. Marketing can drive traffic to your website but if customers don't find anything useful at your site, they won't come back and you've lost a key opportunity to engage them. Keep in mind that customer retention is as important as customer acquisition.



3. Target the Right Platforms

Currently in Canada the smartphone market is dominated by three operating systems: iOS, Android and BlackBerry. Based on the dominant market share these combined platforms enjoy, we recommend limiting the initial mobile offerings to these platforms. That said, the industry is in flux. While Microsoft sits at under 5% market share with Windows Phone 7, Microsoft has deep pockets. In fact, Microsoft has recently made a lot of noise announcing their new consumer focused Surface tablet and new Windows Phone 8 operating system. These announcements, coupled with a strong partnership with Nokia, indicate a clear commitment on behalf of Microsoft to gain a stronger foothold in the mobile space. RIM is also preparing to launch their new BB10 mobile operating system based on their QNX acquisition. Their BB10 Jam World Tour is geared at generating excitement for the platform. As the market evolves, support for additional mobile platforms may need to be considered in future phases.



4. Measure Usage and Encourage User Feedback

It is strongly recommended that implementing analytics to measure site usage and providing the visitor with an easy feedback mechanism be part of the new site design. The data gathered should then be used to drive the prioritization of future features and enhancements. At the outset of your project, manage scope with an aim of getting to market quickly with an initial offering that has core value for customers. Then provide easy customer feedback channels and measure usage of the app's and website's functionality. This helps you understand what features customers are using, if they are using them as intended, and allows you to hear what customers like, don't like and would like to see in the future.

5. Support Your Approach

Finally, as with any website endeavor, make sure you have a plan in place for on-going support. Each year new versions of the major mobile operating systems are released with new features. New devices flood the market with new screens and new browsers. All of this means on-going testing and tweaking. Generally, if you design and architect properly up front, your support issues should be minor, but at a minimum it means periodic testing of your mobile offering on the new platforms and devices as they roll out. Have a plan in place to fix issues proactively and avoid complaints from angry customers that could tarnish your brand.



Conclusion

The number of smartphone users in Canada is continually changing, but all sources conclude that both penetration of smartphone devices and usage are on the rise. According to a study conducted by J.D. Power and Associates in May 2012, 54% of Canadians own a smartphone, up 18% from the previous year.

Whether you choose to mobile optimize your website or develop a native experience, with more than half of the population using their phones to access information on the go, it is easy to understand why providing a seamless mobile experience is essential.

About the Author

Marc Henderson

With over 15 years of software development experience, Marc has a proven track record building custom enterprise software solutions at global organizations including large consumer and investment banks as well as insurance companies. In addition to his enterprise software development experience Marc has a strong design background. He began his career at one of Canada's largest educational publishers where he designed educational materials and wrote interactive, scholastic CD-ROM and web-based games. Throughout his career Marc has been interested in leading-edge technologies with a particular interest in mobile technologies. As a result, his recent work history includes many years of doing mobile application development and research assignments that follow key evolutions in mobile communications.

About Intelliware Development Inc.

Intelliware is a custom software, mobile solutions and product development company headquartered in Toronto, Canada. Intelliware is a leader in Agile software development practices which ensure the delivery of timely, high quality solutions for clients. Intelliware is engaged as a technical partner by a wide range of local, national and global organizations in sectors that span Financial Services, e-Health, ICT, Retail, Manufacturing, and Government.

Intelliware placed among the Top 5 Mobile Technologies Companies in the 2012 Branham300 report, the definitive listing of Canada's Information and Communication Technology (ICT) industry leaders, as ranked by revenues.

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