Internet Marketing Consultants

This is one of the 'Best of' articles written by Barry Welford. The current portfolio of these articles is to be found at http://smmbc.ca/portfolio/

When Mobile-Friendly Is Not Enough For Users

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Living with a Samsung Fascinate 3G Android smartphone provides a new window on the world. In such a situation, what will quickly strike you is the almost night and day difference between using the phone as a phone versus browsing the Internet via the smartphone. Very few websites are really mobile friendly to the same level as the basic phone system. This is a problem that website owners must tackle and soon.

The Switch To The Mobile Internet

As Google has pointed out in a recent study, the shift to mobile is so strong that they must do everything they can to help businesses adapt immediately. In the next year or two there will be more traffic on the mobile Internet than occurs on the desktop Internet. Companies must ensure they can dialogue with these mobile Internet users or risk losing access to the majority of their markets. How can they best do this?

The One Web Principle

The World Wide Web Consortium believes that Internet visitors should have a satisfactory viewing experience whatever device they may be using, whether mobile or desktop. To this end, they have developed Mobile Web Best Practices 1.0, which provides Guidelines embodying what they have dubbed the **One Web Principle**:

> *One Web means making, as far as is reasonable, the same information and services available to users irrespective of the device they are using. However, it does not mean that exactly the same information is available in exactly the same representation across all devices. The context of mobile use, device capability variations, bandwidth issues and mobile network capabilities all affect the representation.*

This is a laudable goal, but as we will see it presents an insuperable challenge. Many people do not realize this for reasons that we will explain.

Making Websites Mobile Friendly

As might be imagined, given the opportunity represented by the Mobile Web, many large companies are investing in a major way to make it all happen. Google is one such company. It has presented advice to webmasters for making websites mobile friendly. However there is an interesting distinction that Google makes:

> Google differentiates between traditional mobile cell phones and smartphones. Google has two bots: Googlebot and Googlebot-Mobile. Googlebot crawls desktop-browser type of webpages and content embedded in them and Googlebot-Mobile crawls mobile content.

Currently only traditional cell phones are supported with special user-agent strings within Googlebot-Mobile, not smartphones (this may change).

They do this because they expect smartphones to be able to handle desktop experience content so there is no real need for mobile-specific effort from webmasters to accommodate smartphones.

In other words, Google is assuming that webmasters will follow the One Web Principle and will ensure that via style sheets or other means smartphones can render the regular (desktop) web pages in a satisfactory way. The article quoted above gives advice on what rendering differences should be made to give a satisfactory viewing experience when viewing the website through a smartphone.

How Mobile Friendly Are Typical Websites

Jakob Nielsen has recently reported on Mobile Usability of websites and he sees improvement but need for much more effort.

> The user experience of mobile websites and apps has improved since our last research, but we still have far to go. A dedicated mobile site is a must, and apps get even higher usability scores.
> ...
> It's time to redesign your mobile site, because your existing version is probably far below users' growing expectations for user experience quality.

In general the average webmaster seems to pay insufficient attention to usability, even for desktop browsing, so these needed improvements recommended by Nielsen may be a long time in coming.

How Well Do Major Websites Provide Mobile-Friendly Content

The World Wide Web Consortium provides a tool, [the MobileOK Validator](). This assesses how well mobile versions of websites are likely to give good user experience. The scale goes from 0 to 100%.

Scores for the mobile versions of 5 major blogs and 5 major news source websites showed fairly poor results for what you might have thought should be the cream of the crop. If you visit any of these mobile websites on your iPhone or Android phone, you will find them usually acceptable but they do not have the same functionality that you have with the basic phone functions.

Product-driven versus customer-centered

One reason why these results are so poor may be that there is a certain culture in the companies producing these websites. Harvey Thompson of IBM coined the expression, [customer-centered enterprise](), versus the diametric opposite, the product-driven enterprise. In product-driven enterprises like Microsoft, everyone works to produce the best possible products they can. On the other hand, in customer-centered enterprises like Amazon everyone is concerned with the real needs of customers and is trying hard to fulfill them. He was concerned with marketing and customer service but the same principle applies elsewhere in the organization.

In designing websites, you can try to produce the best website you can or instead you can try to produce the website that visitors will find works best for them. Most designers have grown up with desktop browsers on screens that are growing in size all the time. Although they may feel they have done a great job of simplifying and cutting their web pages back to the essentials, they are rating their efforts through desktop 'glasses' (perceptions) that have built up over the years. If they ask their colleagues who have the same background experience whether they have done a good job in this process, then they may well get a positive response.

It can be quite a different picture if they talk to visitors to their websites on mobile devices. Unfortunately such usability tests are rarely done with representatives of their various audiences. The designers will never be aware of how difficult a challenge they have given to some of their visitors.

Delivering Satisfactory Mobile User Experiences

What should a mobile user expect in browsing the Internet with their smartphone. If that smartphone is [a Windows Phone 7](), then Microsoft is promising them Easier sharing, smarter applications and a better web.

However Tony Bradley of PCWorld has pointed out that there is [a flaw in the Microsoft thinking]().

When it comes to smartphones, Windows Phone 7 should arguably be the de facto platform for business professionals, but Microsoft may be delivering too little, too late.

The problem with Microsoft's attempts at a mobile platform for smartphones is that Microsoft sees the world through the eyes of a desktop. Windows Mobile treats smartphones as if they are just much smaller notebook computers and tries to apply the same principles and technologies as it does for Windows desktops.

That is exactly the argument we have been presenting here.

A reasonable expectation for that mobile user might well be that browsing the Internet should be as satisfying as using the basic functions of the smart phone.

Since most visitors have larger fingers and are trying to use a small screen, factors such as Fitts Law come into play. Any important button you might wish to click (swipe), should be closer and bigger. These considerations are much less important in thinking about working with a large desktop screen and pointing with a mouse.
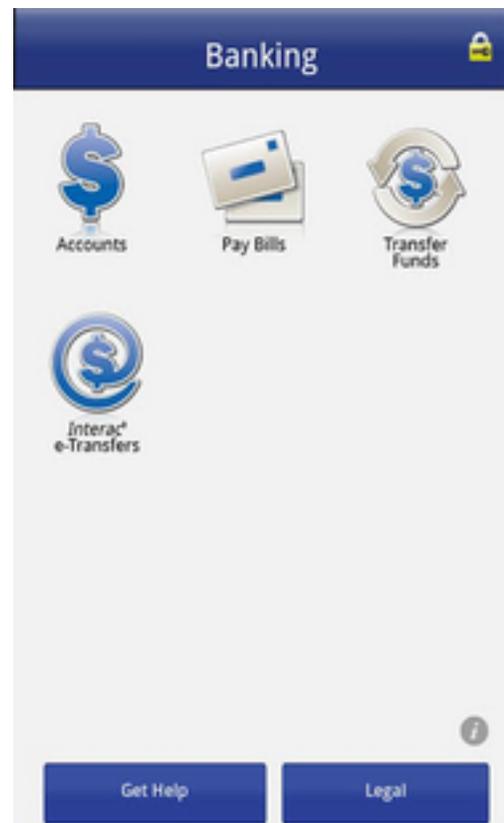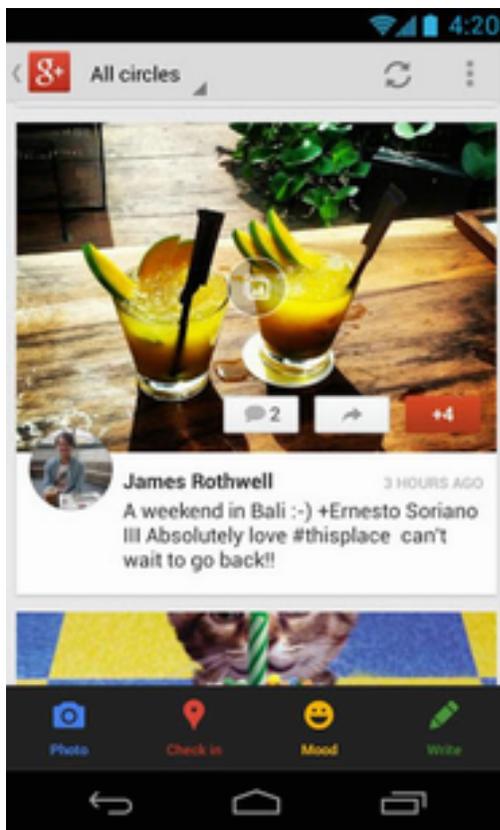
Above are two Apps that work well on an Android smartphone. On the left is a screenshot for Google Plus. On the right is the App for online banking with the Royal Bank of Canada. In both cases, tasks to be accomplished are very much easier in the App than in the equivalent mobile website.

The kind of smartphone screen displays that will work well for human visitors are not easily derived from the content and structure of web pages designed to be rendered on a desktop monitor. The only way of providing smartphone screen displays that work well is to directly develop Apps for the particular smartphone application.

Most of the news sources mentioned above also have Apps. They are often not visible enough on the main website but with a little searching, they usually can be found. One should not assume that all Apps will be designed well and will deliver an optimal visitor experience. However the odds are much higher and many of them do an excellent job of making online information readily available.

Conclusion

The One Web Principle has influenced much of the development of online websites in recent years. Many develop websites that work well on desktop PCs and then consider how to modify these to make them mobile friendly. The technical challenge involved is significant and yet the final result will rarely provide the simple interfaces that swiping fingers on small screens must have. It is much better to accept that the flexibility of designing an App for the particular source and for the specific mobile device will always result in a more satisfactory experience for the mobile visitor.