

COLUMNS

How retailers can adopt a mobile-first strategy

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This year, consider whether your brand is applying a mobile-first approach to all of your commerce planning for the months ahead.

Your desktop site will always matter in the path to purchase, but the majority of your customers have a smartphone in their pocket that they use incessantly. It is time that your digital retail properties master their response to this reality.

Omnipotent

According to forecasts from Goldman Sachs, by 2018 the mobile commerce market is expected to reach the same level as ecommerce was in 2013, at \$630 billion in sales. And according to Nielsen, nearly 20 percent of all retail sales across the United States are in some way influenced by mobile. That number is sure to grow.

Mobile is no longer an individual channel to consider it is connecting all of the channels, legitimately linking in-store and digital. This is why we are hearing so much buzz around "omnichannel" and mobile payments.

Every retailer is plotting its omnichannel strategy, and because mobile best practices have not quite been established yet it becomes the afterthought of a retail strategy instead of the primary focus as it should be.

In some cases, retailers are throwing every mobile trick at the wall to see what sticks, or not throwing anything at all because they think their customer base will remain loyal to their old way of operating which is a very dangerous mindset.

It can be difficult to know whether to develop a native application, a mobile-optimized Web site which is quickly becoming obsolete or focus on responsive Web design. Further, it is even harder to understand the effectiveness of each without professional help. But that is no excuse for inaction.

Retailers that continue to prioritize the desktop commerce experience need to consider what that means for the increasing number of mobile users.

Navigation is cumbersome, content cannot scale, and functionality deteriorates. Perhaps most important to note is that users have less patience than ever. They will not hesitate to jump ship in an instant to one of your competitors' sites who offer a better mobile experience.

Retailers have to flip the old way of thinking on its head to make sure that, at the very least, a Web site's layout, content and functionality are developed for the smallest displays and resolution first, making it easier to scale up and give customers the ability to view content and experience functionality on larger screens.

That is not to say a retailer should only focus on its mobile properties it should instead be viewed as an easier way to extend and enhance what retailers have been doing for years.

So where should you start?

You need to understand your customers. Run site analysis to know where your customers are coming from, where traffic originates, how they are accessing your site, and what kind of devices they are using. How does it affect their path to purchase?

Map out your typical shopper journeys and be that much more knowledgeable about where mobile can improve the user experience and sales.

Determine your business goals and resources. After gaining a better understanding of your customer base, it is time to decide how to go mobile. Will a native app be best received by users? Are most of your shoppers coming from a mobile browser? Is responsive Web design a good intermediary approach for your business? You can look to research to help your decision.

For instance, an AdMedia study in 2013 showed that consumers only spend 27 percent of their time using retail apps.

Other research from Google shows that 67 percent of consumers are more likely to purchase from a mobile-friendly Web site than from a non-mobile-friendly Web site. Regardless, these findings might only represent a small population.

It is ultimately up to you to gain an educated understanding of your customers.

Know whether native apps speak to your brand. When interfacing with your brand, do users expect a particular experience to accompany their path to purchase?

Native apps are typically highly personalized, and that is because retailers have access to a plethora of data from user profiles to serve custom content, individual in-app alerts and any other experiences unique to the brand.

If you have a loyal customer base that will be excited by the thought of a mobile app, creating and maintaining awareness and relevance of the app will be less of a challenge.

Just think: separate devices, separate sites. If you like specific properties to play in their own sandbox, this is the approach for you.

But while a mobile site might be a fast and manageable approach, it is only a Band-Aid for a long term challenge: the number of devices, operating systems and screen sizes will only increase, and your mobile site will likely not support all of them. It also separates your marketing and search engine optimization efforts by redirecting from the home page with a different destination URL.

Still confused? Consider responsive Web design. Responsive Web design is gaining momentum because it gives retailers the best of both worlds.

By leveraging a set of design techniques involving flexible grids, layouts, images and use of CSS that automatically adapt to a user based on device, screen size, orientation and operating system, customers will experience optimal viewing, reading and navigation on any device. Even if your brand is pulled up on Google Glass or a smart television, you are covered.

Responsive Web design requires a comprehensive effort upfront in the form of a complete redesign.

In the past, critics have claimed responsive design could not support a full ecommerce offering. But platforms have significantly advanced to include business rules and workflows that allow for full customization of content served on different devices available today and to those in the future.

After the initial upfront effort, the long-term benefits prevail in that your team is no longer required to maintain multiple apps, mobile sites and desktop sites, which saves retailers massive amounts of time, and dramatically enhances the shopping experience.

EITHER WAY, retailers that desire to be successful must satisfy the customer's urge to be mobile 95 percent of the time. Mark my words, you will lose them to the competition if you do not cater to this lifestyle.

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