COLUMNS

Is responsive Web design overhyped?

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By Keith Lietzke

Responsive Web design is all the rage. We hear advocates asserting that "responsive is the way to develop sites." Or "Google recommends responsive for SEO."

Observers might think that this approach has become the de facto standard among ecommerce leaders. But a close look at the top companies in the Internet Retailer rankings reveals a surprising reality: Of the top 16 retailers, only two have chosen responsive Web design.

What is the disconnect here? Why has this hot-trending technique not taken hold among the industry leaders? Are we confusing mobile-friendly as mobile-optimized?

Of course, there are pros and cons for every approach. Let us take a quick look.

Responsive strengths
Responsive is an elegant solution for handling small screen sizes.

By reprogramming the desktop site's HTML and redesigning the layout, site owners can deliver pages that know how to adjust for screen size via a media query, that lets the HTML respond to the browser's screen width.

Responsive meets the standards that Google has set for being mobile-friendly. Responsive sites, properly done, will be saved from Google's Mobilegeddon.

Responsive Web design adopts a "one-site-fits-all" approach that promises a lower cost of ownership, although mileage and requirements may vary.

Responsive weaknesses
Responsive has one glaring problem: slow pageload speeds.

A responsive page works by delivering more content to the smartphone, and then asking the mobile browser to sort things out based on its screen width. Good caching strategies and CDN techniques can be implemented to help reduce this drag on performance.

Deploying responsive means reworking the current desktop site. This is something that your Web developer in-house or external will love as a project. But it is entirely disruptive to your current desktop business, analogous to replatforming.

Dedicated strengths
Responsive falls short in situations where the retailer actually wants to have the mobile experience different than the desktop experience.

The advocates of "one-site-fits-all" might ask why you would ever want to deliver different experiences. There are several key reasons because, as we all know, mobile is so much more than just a small screen:

Mobile UI capabilities: Mobile brings enhanced capabilities for interaction such as location, touch, voice, camera, fingerprint and motion. All add richness to the mobile experience which the desktop site does not have, and does not need to accommodate

Different user circumstances: Consumers have their phones in many settings that the desktop site need not worry about, such as in stores, on sports fields, or in the garage, where the retailers product is being used and in social settings. Might these differences create an advantage in having a mobile experience different than the desktop? Very likely

Different desired outcomes: Because of its omni-presence, mobile is the ideal omnichannel device. We know consumers use mobile for product discovery and research, even when they complete the purchase in a different channel such as online, in store or call center. Should the mobile UI not help facilitate this in a way different than the desktop does? Different calls-to-action, different ways to prioritize them

Perspective
1. Responsive is a good choice for making a desktop site mobile-friendly. As a Web development technique, it is an elegant way to deliver the desktop experience to the small screen.

2. Dedicated sites are the better choice for delivering a mobile-optimized site. For retailers who want to get the most out of mobile, dedicated sites make it easier to take advantage of unique mobile capabilities that the desktop site is not geared for, and to deliver different calls-to-action that optimize across all channels.

RESPONSIVE IS a useful technique for adjusting Web pages to screen size.

Developers love it as a tool. It is one of several methods for integrating the mobile experience into the retailer's Web infrastructure. But that does not make it a good mobile strategy.

If mobile-friendly is good enough for your company, then responsive is a fine choice.

A better choice for your company might be to take full advantage of mobile-unique capabilities and deliver a distinct mobile experience.

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