

COLUMNS

As mobile conversion rate stagnates at 1pc, time to reassess responsive Web design?

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By **Wilson Kerr**

The responsive Web design bandwagon has been rolling on for three-plus years now and, in the face of ever-increasing mobile traffic numbers, it is time to apply some real scrutiny.

At a glance, the benefits of RWD seem clear. One site to manage and your content is delivered downstream to all devices. Desktop. Mobile. Tablet. All for one and one for all. Easy-peasy. Yada, yada.

But wait a mobile minute. Mobile buying behavior is unique, right? Different slices of your customer base use mobile more than others, right? Some items or categories convert better on mobile than desktop and vice versa, right?

Platform issues

I recently spoke at the Big Internet Retailer Show in Chicago and, while in the ready room, I met a fellow speaker a retailer about to present on RWD. He described his company's re-platform effort to RWD as the longest, hardest and most-expensive technical effort the retailer had ever undertaken, but also mentioned an increased mobile conversion rate over the non-optimized site of 15 percent.

During his actual talk, I learned that the retailer's average mobile page-load time was more than four seconds yikes.

In the ready room, I listened to his story and asked him two simple questions. The first was, "What percentage of your traffic is mobile?" His answer? 52 percent. Wow.

The second was, "If mobile is a majority of your traffic, how do you position the product offering on your mobile site to match the buying behavior of that audience to maximize conversions?" Silence.

The retail executive seemed genuinely stumped. Had he successfully removed the burden of having to manage mobile separately, but by doing so, thrown out a big baby with the bathwater?

The truth that needs to be spoken to the waning power of RWD is that mobile buying behavior is unique, and responsive design removes the ability to deliver a specific experience catering to this behavior to increase conversion rates.

Sure, like anything else worth doing, this takes a bit of work, but the upside is undeniable and the downside potentially catastrophically limiting. And more so every day, as mobile traffic percentages keep on growing.

Load of sense

Think about it: How can you move the needle on mobile conversion rates when your mobile site is really just a tethered, derivative version of your desktop site? Wait, is a RWD site delivered to a mobile user really a mobile site?

No. It is not.

When mobile was 10 percent to 20 percent of online traffic, RWD might have made some sense for retail, even with the heavy workload of re-platforming and bearing the burden of page-load times that are almost always far slower.

But with mobile traffic now crossing the 50 percent mark for many retailers, removing the ability to cater an experience specifically to fully half of their traffic is fast morphing into big limitation/negative.

The free RWD Kool-Aid has been passed out at trade shows and conferences for three years now and many have drunk deeply from this chalice. It is time to take a step back.

MOBILE IS DIFFERENT and unique, and in need of a conversion rate lift long stagnated at around 1 percent. This lift can be accomplished most-effectively and rapidly by delivering a mobile-specific experience that can be tailored to the buying behavior of the audience. Duh.

A dedicated mobile site takes a little more work, sure, but the payoff in conversion rate lift, site performance and the freedom inherent in untethering from the shrinking influence of desktop is worth it. Truth.

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