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Mobile commerce success starts with a device-agnostic approach

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With the increased mobile commerce activity the industry has seen in 2010, and especially during the holiday season, the debate is over: consumers' rapidly evolving research and buying behavior are clearly showing that the mobile medium needs to become a critical piece of any online sales strategy.

It is no longer a question of whether you need a mobile presence, but rather how you can deliver the best mobile experience and integrate it seamlessly into your customers' cross-channel interactions with your business.

A successful mobile strategy requires more than just enabling mobile transactions.

Just like in your store or online channels, customers expect to be able to use their mobile devices to discover and research products, seek advice from friends and experts, explore your store and consider their options.

Smartphones and other mobile devices should be viewed as an opportunity to influence your customers' buying decisions, even if a purchase is ultimately closed through a non-mobile channel.

How will you take advantage of that opportunity?

To achieve real results, make your brand shine and power business growth via the mobile medium, a well-planned, two-phased approach is in order.

Optimize mobile site to be device-agnostic

First, build your mobile foundation: Optimize your mobile site for all mobile browsers, ensuring that your site is accessible and provides an optimal experience via any Web-enabled mobile device.

Most consumers will start with their mobile browsers, rather than device-specific applications, to research products.

You want to make sure your site will be found easily via a mobile Web search, and that it will provide the best possible mobile experience when a consumer lands on it.

There are tens of thousands of applications for the iPod, iPad, Android devices and BlackBerry phones. It is difficult to stand out in that crowd unless a consumer is specifically searching for your brand.

For that reason, relying solely on a device-based application to power your mobile strategy can be a risky proposition.

A browser application can be built on standard Web development platforms, keeping development resources in check.

Browser-based mobile stores also have the advantage of limiting the need to build and manage independent applications for each device, especially as new devices continue to hit an already fragmented market.

In addition, the rapidly expanding capabilities of mobile browsers are quickly narrowing the gap between the experience delivered on the browser versus on a device-specific application, so you will be able to serve the needs of more customers by simply taking that first step of a browser-based approach.

But again, the primary reason to start with a browser-optimized mobile site is to make your mobile site as easy to find as possible.

Incorporate device-based apps opportunistically

Once your mobile browser-optimized foundation is in place, your next step is to understand where you can enhance your mobile success by developing targeted, value-added, device-based applications for the iPhone, iPad, Android or BlackBerry.

The goal of these applications should be to provide business benefits that you cannot achieve via the mobile browser.

These applications must be custom built and maintained to keep up with the changing capabilities of each device.

Before investing your resources in the creation of device-based applications, have clear goals. Understand your target audiences, potential use cases, and what you want the application to achieve.

For example:

Some merchants leverage the unique capabilities of a device to provide more custom experiences that differentiate their brand from other retailers.

Tommy Hilfiger's iPhone application takes advantage of native iPhone capabilities, allowing the consumer to shake the phone to clear a search, and use the touch-enabled features of the iPhone for browsing collections, zooming in and panning, adding items to a cart and receive push notifications when a product is in stock.

The Tommy Hilfiger application adds unique value and streamlines the checkout process by giving the consumer quick-fill capabilities to rapidly enter billing and shipping information.

Other merchants offer device-based rewards program applications. Starbucks incorporated the My Starbucks Rewards loyalty program into its application so that consumers could better track their progress toward their free drinks.

PepsiCo Foodservice launched an iPhone application offering a loyalty program that rewards consumers for visiting restaurants that serve Pepsi beverages.

Some retailers promote daily deals through mobile applications. Groupon's iPhone application displays deals each day in its participating cities, allowing users to make purchases.

WHATEVER YOUR mobile strategy is, keep in mind that a consumer's ever-present mobile device is destined to become the connector of all other channels

Web, physical stores, contact centers, catalogs and social in ways that are still emerging.

We may still not know exactly what direction all of this dynamic change is taking, but this fact is guaranteed: If you provide a satisfying and relevant experience that connects and unifies all these channels, you will ultimately enjoy a profitable, long-term relationship with your customers.

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