COLUMNS

Three rules of the mobile Web

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By Tim McLaughlin

What marketers typically fear most are the concepts they understand least.

The good news, then, is that buyer emotions and motivations are fairly static. These seem to be hard-wired, more or less, into the genetic code of the modern shopper.

Our buying process, however, is in a constant state of flux. And technology is the trigger – not so much for its effect on consumer sentiment, but rather on consumer behavior.

Web of fear

In the 1990s, when the Internet began its drastic reconstruction of the traditional commercial landscape, marketers reacted at first with generalized fear and distrust.

But as the Web demonstrated its significance or, perhaps, its inevitability, marketers were forced to sublimate their fears by reinterpreting the end game. They asked: "How can we take the Internet which we don't understand and use it to propagate in-store retail which we do?"

Perhaps it is human nature to shift unfamiliar concepts onto more agreeable terrain, but the result can be a damaging misreading of the current market opportunity.

Incidentally, it took more than a decade for marketers to truly grasp the game-changing effect of pure online commerce – ten years or more lost because of a stubborn refusal to

accept the natural evolution of technology-enabled buyer behavior.

And what is worse is it is happening all over again.

This time, the concept we fear is the mobile Web, though it is not the Web that has changed, but the personal computer.

And now, having grudgingly accepted the mobile Internet's inevitability, we return to our fallback strategy: reinterpreting the end-game.

We are now asking: "How can we take the mobile Web and use it to propagate the desktop Web?"

Should you ever find yourself asking this question, stop. Immediately. It is a losing proposition.

Like it or not, marketers simply cannot succeed by forcing users to alter their preferred buying behavior. We lost that war, plain and simple.

It does not matter how powerful your brand may be. Users are now in full control of their own engagement experiences.

So our charge today is not getting customers where we want them, it is delivering a brand experience optimized to where they already are.

Rule No. 1: Do not recreate the desktop experience

Finding the optimal user interface for a mobile device may mean completely removing certain aspects of your full-version Web site. Phones have less screen real estate, after all.

Commonly, desktop sites will use the right side the screen for cross-promotional advertising or major visual branding elements.

But on a phone, there is no room for right-side content. So already, you are forced to prioritize—and then jettison—certain functionalities for the mobile user.

In truth, these functionalities are not being lost, but rather transferred to the desktop portal.

Remember that your mobile site and your desktop site are complementary in nature.

In fact, if you design for each platform cleanly and clearly, users will intuitively grasp the value provided by your multiple channels.

Case in point: When the mobile Web site for Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group was created, it was obvious that viewing room photographs on a mobile phone would be inherently less immersive than viewing those same images on a full-size monitor.

So a button was created for users to email themselves a link to the desktop version of the identical page for later viewing on the PC.

It is critical in these instances not to force your users into one channel or another, but rather to facilitate the migration between channels, as needed, and to help users understand how best to enjoy different aspects of your Web content – high-resolution

photography on the desktop or location-based services on the mobile phone.

Rule No. 2: Leave no tablet behind

The mobility of a phone with the screen resolution of a desktop? Intriguing, to say the least.

Perhaps more than any other platform, the tablet computer possesses the necessary tools to recreate several pleasurable aspects of the in-store shopping experience.

If we imagine two shopping archetypes – the hunter and the recreationalist – a desktop buying experience most likely satisfies only the former.

If a site is architected cleanly and appropriately, the hunter likely finds what she is looking for. But the experience offers little excitement or joy for the recreationalist shopper.

On a mobile phone, the outcome is even worse.

Our hunter may not be able to find what she needs with a smaller-resolution screen and limited site architecture, though the convenience of anytime shopping has tremendous appeal.

Meanwhile, our recreationalist finds little enjoyment from the smaller visuals and difficult navigation.

But now imagine the tablet.

With more screen real estate, it supports the lush imagery and full architecture of a rich desktop Web site.

The tablet's portability provides convenience for the hunter. And a touch-based interface adds a tactile element that makes the experience a bit more real and tangible for the recreationalist.

Remember, though, that these benefits can only be realized by customizing a buying experience specifically for the tablet platform.

While the user base for tablet computers may still be relatively small, it is a booming demographic, and a highly affluent, highly educated one at that.

In fact, the user experience possibilities are so promising on the tablet that many organizations are generating more conversions with fewer overall leads.

But rest assured, it takes a custom interface to make the tablet sing.

If you think you can simply place a facsimile of your desktop site onto the tablet platform and expect the same conversion rates, you are headed for a rude awakening.

Rule No. 3: Luxury is as luxury does

Simply put: The more luxurious your brand, the more you will need to focus on the experiential aspects of your mobile site.

If you are asking customers to pay a premium price, they will be expecting a premium experience, which includes the flexibility to accommodate their channel preferences.

And while we tend to assume that imagery and design are the key components of a luxury brand impression, mobile devices with their limited visual real estate emphasize a different element altogether: interaction.

Transitions, fades, gesture recognition and other experiential components can be the difference between a classy, polished mobile presence and a stark, utilitarian one.

Hyundai's Equus app is a perfect example – changing consumer perceptions of the brand through the South Korean automaker's slick, elegant mobile product.

YOU ARE NEVER going to create the perfect mobile experience. That is an unrealistic expectation that would seriously challenge even the best, most experienced mobile developers.

What is important is to simply identify with your mobile users, to accentuate the capabilities of the mobile platform, to mask its limitations and to demonstrate an appreciation for your users' time and autonomy.

Think of your mobile site not as a conduit, but as a destination. Customers are going to be there, and it is your job to make the experience as useful and pleasurable as possible.

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