COLUMNS

Who cares about anything except iOS and Android?

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By Jeff Williams

A couple of months ago I was sitting at my desk developing a mobile site for the fourth-largest retailer in the country. I was racking my brain to figure out how I could create a way for users to select multiple objects and additional functionality without forcing a page load.

So when my colleague offered a nice Javascript solution, I reminded him, "But it won't work for BlackBerry or Nokia users." He turned around and said, "Who cares?"

That made me think about the whole way we are supporting mobile browsers.

Browser douser

Developing for the Web for the past 12 years, we have learned to test every browser, every version, and every situation known to mankind so that our Web experience is decent for everybody.

Yes, that man living under a rock in Utah running Internet Explorer 5 on a dial-up will still be able to enter the sweepstakes! We are covered.

Along comes the next-generation mobile Web, a few years old and still in its infancy.

Now, we have a whole new slew of bizarre browsers to support when designing mobile experiences.

There is the leader, Safari, whose open source engine – according to Apple – also powers the native Android Web browser, making it 90 percent of the mobile Web browser market.

But what about the Symbian platform, BlackBerry OS and the Windows mobile browser? Do not forget the Opera Mobile users, Opera Mini, Fennec, Ozone, Netfront, Phonegap and ones I have never even heard of?

We have got to make sure all those users have a great experience, right?

Wrong.

Bye OS

I would like to offer a new philosophy regarding mobile Web browser support: Concentrate on iOS and Android exclusively. Send everyone else to the regular HTML site.

The basic message is focus on devices that have sophisticated browsers with multi-touch capabilities. Everything else, you are on your own.

In fact, in the last mobile experience I designed, we decided to detect iOS or Android. If not, we redirected to the full HTML site and good luck to you. By the way, get a real smartphone while you are at it.

I know it seems cruel and counter-intuitive to the basic QA process that we have developed for user-testing over the last 15 years, but here is the reasoning:

1. BlackBerry and Nokia are dying brands – why waste time supporting it? Windows will likely absorb the Symbian platform, and it will imitate the market-leading browsers anyway.

2. A phone is not a PC, so it should not be treated the same way. Phone browsing is still a luxury, and not a necessity, so we have more license to be picky for whom we develop experiences.

3. It is extremely inefficient to develop separate experiences for multiple platforms. Build it once.

4. Unleash the power of Javascript and jQuery Mobile in your experiences. Do not make your experiences bland because it will not work with BlackBerry 5 users.

5. Design for the future, not for the past. The writing is on the wall – iOS and Android will dominate the market, so you might as well design for what the market is demanding and will be demanding for the unforeseeable future.

6. Users with iPhones and Androids are expecting the most high-end user experience

SO, MAKE THE paradigm shift, cut the chord, and you will feel better. It is a whole new refreshing world.

Instead of worrying how your shopping cart page is going to render in Symbian S60 v3.2, you will be creating a dynamic touch interface cart page that will wow your client.

Feel the freedom now?

As for you BlackBerry users, I heard there were places where they were melting down BlackBerrys for scrap metal, but you cannot find them because your GPS locator probably will not work.

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