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Facebook spearheads mobile Web standards project

March 1, 2012



By CHANTAL TODE

Facebook is spearheading a group of mobile industry stakeholders focused on developing mobile Web standards, reflecting the growing importance of mobile to the social network.

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Speaking at the Mobile World Congress this week, Bret Taylor, chief technology officer of Facebook reportedly said that the company is working with carriers to make it easier for consumers to purchase apps on their devices through carrier billing. In its recent filing for an initial public offering, Facebook said mobile use is growing and that the company needs to find a way to monetize mobile.

“I think it means that Facebook will increasingly become a distribution platform for mobile services,” said Paris-based Thomas Husson, a senior analyst at [Forrester Research](#).

“While not yet a standard, HTML5 will help Facebook to become a platform for branded mobile Web sites,” he said.

“There is an analogy to be made with their role as a platform for social games. They have a huge mobile audience to leverage, social graph data capabilities and they are putting

together billing capabilities with carriers - a key approach for emerging markets where they are expanding quickly.”

Harnessing HTML5's potential

At the World Mobile Congress in Barcelona, Mr. Taylor said Facebook has created a World Wide Web Consortium community group focused on mobile Web standards.

The W3C Mobile Web Platform Core Community Group already has 74 participants, including representatives of Nokia, Opera, Intel and Mozilla.

However, Apple and Google appear to be missing from the list of participants.

The group will work on accelerating the improvement and standardization of mobile browsers. Specifically, the group will focus on HTML5, which is a group of different Web-based technologies that currently lacks standardization but which many believe holds enormous potential for reaching a broad group of mobile users.

For Facebook, such standardization would be a way to insure that its apps are more broadly distributed.

“Facebook sees that because of their elaborate social network that friends are likely to download apps that their friends are using,” said Ian Jacobs, head of marketing and communications for [W3C](#), Chicago.

“When they download them, Facebook would like to make sure these apps are going to work on the broadest array of devices as possible,” he said.

The group will focus on three main areas: identifying features of the Web platform that developers can rely on as being broadly available, making tests available to automate the testing of software to insure it supports these features and improving the mobile Web experience.

Updating best practices

The W3C Mobile Web Platform Core Community Group will provide an opportunity to update the mobile Web best practices that W3C published in 2008.

“Things have moved very quickly in the past few years,” Mr. Jacobs said. “We’ve seen the arrival of tablets and the proliferation of Web browser-enabled devices.

“New technologies are being standardized and deployed,” he said. “We expect there to be billions of HTML5-enabled browsers on phones in the next couple of years.

“It is time to step up to what the market is now enabling.”

Mobile Web momentum

One of the benefits of mobile Web standards could be the lowering of development costs for Web-based mobile apps by enabling developers to create once and deploy everywhere.

“One of the promises of HTML5 is the ability to reach all devices,” Mr. Jacobs said. “One of the reasons to have this group is to speed up testing to improve interoperability.

“It boils down to reaching more devices and more people at less cost,” he said.

At the same time that Facebook and others are focusing on mobile Web apps, others in the mobile space are very intent on supporting native apps, which currently typically offer a better experience than mobile Web apps.

“It is not clear that consumers can tell the different between a native app and a Web app,” Mr. Jacobs said. “What people like is full access to the capabilities of their devices.

“Today, native platforms have an advantage in terms of providing access to more capabilities and a performance advantage,” he said. “The Web platform is catching up and the industry has embraced HTML5.

“There is no doubting the momentum that the Web platform has even as people continue to innovate in native apps.”

Final Take

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