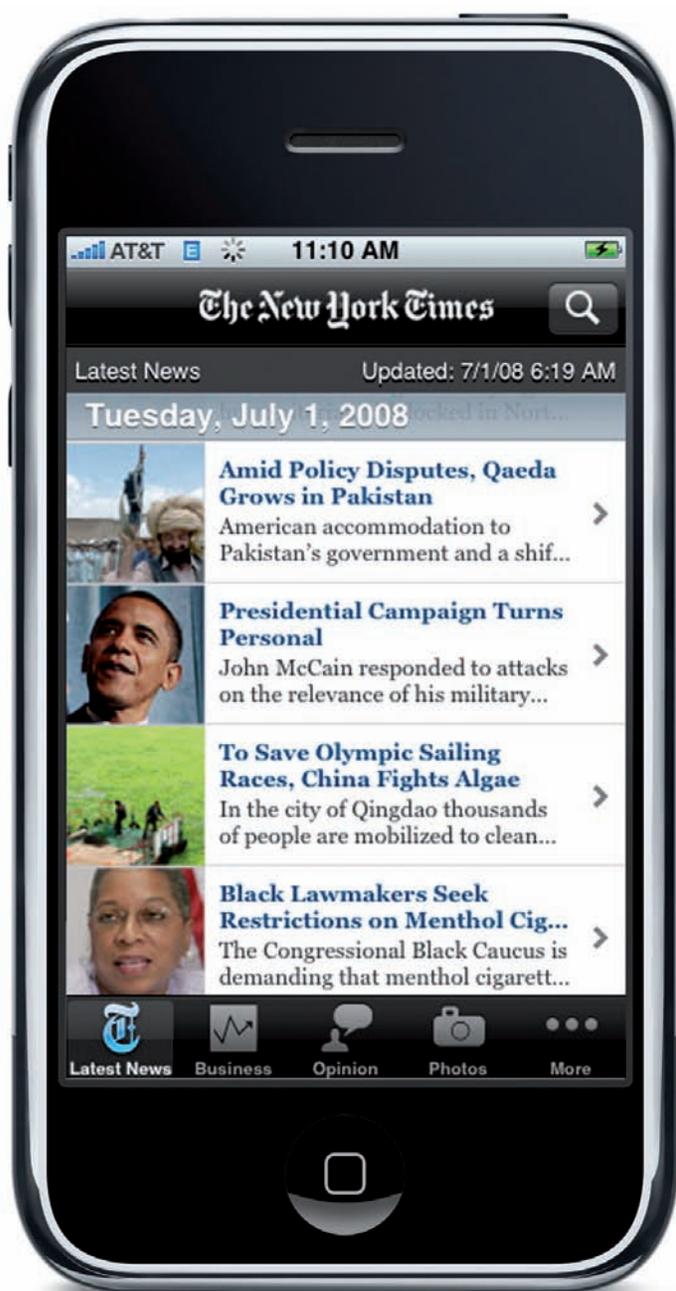


MOBILE WEB

Putting the web in your readers' pockets



What we love about the web is its vastness. What we love about mobile devices is their smallness. That in essence is the problem faced by web designers and content providers when it comes to reaching an audience on the go. The evolution of mobile phones has seen them go from simple communication devices to must-have personal assistants and entertainment centres. Putting the web in your pocket has been the dream for more than a decade, yet it is only now we are seeing an explosion in mobile web use.

What's important about that to publishers is not the current number of people using their mobiles to surf – that number is typically less than 1 percent in even the more developed markets – but the potential for the most dynamic new media market since the web began. The truly good news is that for once the opening up of a new market may not mean the headache of a whole new development platform. Instead, the mobile web looks set to offer a new market for content without extensive re-purposing. Existing web content can be displayed on the new generation of mobile browsers without designing mobile-dedicated sites. Better yet that content takes on a new dimension with the importance of time- and location-specific content coming into their own; these consumers want information “right now, right here. Whilst the total number of mobile browsers remains small, a graph of their growth suggests a picture you can't ignore.

For extended interviews and relevant links, visit: www.ifra.com/flashlight

According to figures from Opera last April, the 11.9 million Opera Mini users worldwide shifted 33 million MB of data to and from their browsers. That's 88 percent growth over the previous quarter which even the most cautious observers would have to accept as explosive.

So why now?

Partly it's due to the iPhone effect. Just six months after launch, the iPhone topped the charts with the most used mobile browser for Internet access in the United States (Source: StatCounter), just ahead of the Symbian OS used in Nokia phones. The iPhone effect is more than the usage of one device, however. It has re-energised an entire market sector with rival phone companies rushing to make their own devices more Internet-friendly while consumers are profiting from better browsers and screens to go online from their mobiles and PDAs.

According to ComScore, the number of mobile devices in the U.S. that accessed the Internet via broadband rocketed by 154 percent in the fourth quarter of 2007, compared to the same period the previous year. To put things in perspective, that still means that only 1 percent of the population is using mobile broadband access but the scope for growth has led to a browser war breaking out on mobile phones with Apple's Safari, Opera Mini, Firefox, and Nokia all squaring up to each other for a piece of the action.

Given that a number of these rivals have yet to prove themselves, it is too early to declare a winner. But what we can say with certainty is that there has been a shift in the way the web is delivered to mobiles. Previously, content providers aimed to create mobile-only sites to cater for handheld users resulting in a reduced web experience (Web-Lite if you like) with approaches such as WAP which delivered tasters of a website, cut and trimmed to fit to a mobile.

Now the emphasis is on delivering the full weight of the web to the mobile browser with Safari, Opera Mini, Firefox, and Nokia all aiming to take your existing

site, complete with its content, its design, and all the branding that entails, and package it on the fly for the (very) small screen.

While they all share the same aim, the different candidates have not taken the same approach to delivering on this promise. Most notably there is a difference between those that have opted for a server-side as opposed to a client-side solution. Opera Mini, for example, relies on a remote server to pre-process web pages to prepare them for delivery to the mobile phone. That proxy server takes care of reformatting and data compression to optimise page for the phone before sending it to the device. To get an idea of the effect that gives, try looking up Google Mobile on your phone/PDA while accessing the main Google site on a desktop. Perform the same search in both and you will see that the mobile service reformats the findings to fit the page in a way its desktop sibling doesn't.

The alternative to that is a client-side solution where the content delivered is the normal web page but the browser does the job of reformatting. That's the promise of the new Nokia Web Browser, which can render web content for the small screen. Content providers then have the choice of doing nothing (and letting the browser render their content), or giving it a steer with CSS styles if they want control over the subsequent layout. To a content provider, the advantage of the client-side solution is clear – you don't have to do anything yourself to optimise your material for a mobile. The downside is that you're relying on users having browsers that can do that, and right now most of them don't. The



Sharon Knitter, senior director of consumer products, Cars.com, U.S.A.:

I see very good potential for publishers in the mobile web. They need to think about what a consumer will want when they are on the move, and provide that content and functionality. It will not work if publishers just take their websites and put their entire site on the mobile web. Just as the website should not be an exact replica of the printed newspaper, the mobile website should not be an exact replica of the regular website.

In a nutshell

Accessing web pages on mobile phones is the fastest growing content market since the web first appeared in the mid nineties, thanks to both better devices with bigger screens (take a bow iPhone) and a new generation of browsers that do a better job of displaying existing content on small screens. Where once mobile content meant the pain of designing a mobile specific site alongside a publisher's existing online content it now seems that redesigning existing pages will be unnecessary. At least, that is, in terms of design. The usage patterns of a surfer on the move are still being studied, but it stands to reason that the, "right here, right now" approach of content on the move will give a greater emphasis to time- and location-specific material.

advantage of the server-side solution is that you can ensure how a web page looks for a far larger number of users, but it does entail running the server with the overheads and expertise that demands. The good news is that either way, the days of creating a separate site for mobile content look to be coming to an end.

The key players

Opera Mini: Imagine you're filling a few free minutes by skim-reading headlines on a mobile phone. Then you come across something really interesting, but you'd rather read it at your leisure and in



Morten Holst, head of mobile, Verdens Gang, Norway:

It must be possible to access the site with all the major browsers marked. Mobile browsers are improving and closing the gap to becoming full-blown browsers and it is not very difficult to set up a user-friendly mobile service. The cost involved is not prohibitive, but depends heavily on the systems and platforms already in use.

full-screen glory. That's why it is important to have the ability to sync data across different devices. Opera Mini 4 can already sync up those mobile phone bookmarks with Opera on your desktop using Opera Link. Opera has two offerings for the mobile web – Opera Mobile for PDAs and smart phones, and Opera Mini for cell phones. Opera Mini is a server-side system that optimises downloads before sending them – meaning faster browser and lower customer

charges for data usage. The downside of that is it limits the interaction between browser and site so may struggle with technologies such as Ajax.

Firefox: appears to be developing two versions of its mobile browser – one for touchscreen phones (think iPhone) and one for non-touchscreen phones (still the vast majority). The full release isn't expected until later this year but features already demonstrated include some neat

navigation, with a short button tap taking your cursor to the next screen element while a longer tap or holding the button starts scrolling. Opera would doubtless point out, however, that Firefox is playing catch-up and offering little not already available on Mini. That may not matter, however, since Firefox has a vastly greater user base on the desktop than Opera. The importance of that kicks in with the advent of syncing data (bookmarks, etc.) from mobile to desktop, which is seen as one of the most attractive promises to come from mobile browsing.

Safari: The brains behind the iPhone's beauty when it comes to the web, Safari offers a full desktop-like experience including RSS (not always the case with other browsers) which is of particular interest to news sites. Right now you don't choose Safari – you choose an

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iPhone and you get Safari. The question is whether Apple will allow other browsers on their notoriously buttoned-down device. The reason for that is that Firefox overtook Safari on the Mac desktop thanks to the extensions written for it. At time of writing it is unclear both whether Apple will allow Firefox, and whether Firefox mobile will allow extensions, so there are more questions than answers.

Nokia: The new Nokia S60 Web Browser aims to deliver a full desktop-style web experience on the go, including RSS feeds and blogs. It includes some of the open source technology behind Safari plus Nokia's Symbian background, and has demonstrated such features as a Mini-Map (page overview) to allow a complete page to be quickly scanned on a small screen. Nokia is making much of its potential performance since the rendering engine that prepares content for the screen has been rated as faster than the Gecko engine used by Firefox. Given that the Firefox browser has yet to see the light of day, however, the proof of that has yet to be established.

NetFront: You've never heard of it because it is a purely embedded browser found on phones, PDAs and even the Sony PSP. It's also popular because it offers good support for Asian languages and requires little performance from the handset. Which means it has largely been used by cheaper phones in the Far East. That may be set to change, however, with the news that Sony Ericsson is considering it for their high-end phones.

This is not an exclusive list and popular but low-end solutions such as Openwave's UP.Browser, Motorola's Native Browser and Teleca's Obigo have been left out because they are not currently poised to take advantage of the full web-on-the-go approach of the latest generation of devices. In an industry typified by flux and invention, however, the smaller players may not be content to let Apple, Nokia, and Firefox have all the glory and complete newcomers like Skyfire are waiting in the wings.

Steve Shipside and Sashi Nair (reader@ifra.com)

Getting your sites mobile-ready is a no-brainer

Stig Nordqvist
IFRA Research Director Digital Media

Duh! So what can I say to motivate you to put even more effort into this matter? The newly released 3G version of the iPhone, and the recent surge in mobile web surfing, indicate a great sharp increase in people seriously using the mobile Internet.

The upside is that consumers actually use it more than you can imagine, and they need good content and information. The downside is that the market is pretty confusing; loads of handsets, browsers, transcoders, aggregators and consultants to "help" you make sure your site is mobile-friendly.

The mobile web landscape is currently shifting dramatically and is dominated by Nokia's newly acquired Symbian OS. Mobile web usage has doubled in the past year globally, and this is only the beginning of a long growth trend. Apple has an edge in that the majority of iPhone consumers surf the Internet a lot. Since the phone's introduction in June 2007 and to date, developers have created more than 17,000 sites or "web applications" optimised for the device.

But, of course, others have also been instrumental in the take-off of the mobile Internet, among them Nokia and Opera, provider of the eponymous mobile browser.

Pioneer publishers in Japan and Scandinavia have been busy almost a decade trying to enable the mobile Internet, but have only in the past year been succeeding, and now, in a great surge, all things come together. The iPhone has created a Flash-like experience when browsing regular websites. This development is indeed



welcomed when you consider that most content providers have largely failed at creating specific sites for mobiles. Its two-touch, zoomable interface makes it, if not enjoyable, then less than maddening compared to reading a regular mobile site. So I can read The Local Newspaper on my iPhone, even though it involves a lot of pinching and zooming, but I still prefer to use sites optimised for the iPhone or other mobiles like the Opera browser in my Sony Ericsson.

My advice is: Put together a team from the editorial and business departments and find out (listen to) what your consumers are most eager to achieve with their mobile experience. And use an agnostic approach – sure you want to optimise your website for the iPhone, but you should also definitely optimise your site for the vast majority of users of other handsets. There are good cases from Malaysia, Stockholm, Washington, Paris, and many other places around the world where the mobile Internet is definitely surging.

This time it is not early adopters but big chunks of your key audience. The majority of consumers surf from a "traditional" mobile phone but the growth in mobile surfing by iPhone users is particularly impressive.

Nordqvist will serve as the chairperson of IFRA's International e-reading conference to be held on 18-19 September in Paris, France. The event will bring together some of the most mobile-minded players in and out of the industry. For more details, visit www.ifra.com/events.