Chapter 12

Ten Quick Tips for Mobile Design

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If you’re looking for a quick reference to some of the biggest do’s and don’ts of mobile Web design, this chapter is for you. We cover most of these tips in greater detail in other chapters of this book, but this collection of ten mobile interface tips gives you a quick overview of the most common issues you’re likely to face while you create a mobile version of your Web site.

Design for Distracted Surfers

We’re sure you’d never surf the Web while you’re driving, and everyone would be a lot safer on the roads if no one else did, either. Unfortunately, the fact that we even have to write that is an indication of one of the biggest challenges in mobile Web design — distracted surfers.
Keep in mind that when people visit a mobile site they’re often doing something else at the same time, and they’re often under pressure to find information quickly.

Here are a few quick tips to make your mobile site easier for distracted visitors to use:

- Make key information, such as your address and phone number, easy to find right away.
- Make all links big and easy to click.
- Use text and background colors with good contrast so that your mobile Web site is easy to read, even in low light.

### Surf the Web on Many Mobile Devices

To appreciate the challenges of the mobile Web, surf to your Web site on a mobile phone. But don’t stop at one phone, especially if you have an iPhone or Droid. These phones may get all the headlines (and a majority of the traffic on the mobile Web), but they’re not the only phones likely to visit your site — they’re just the ones most likely to make your site look good, even if it’s not optimized for the mobile Web.

Don’t let these smartphones fool you with their relatively sophisticated features that make many desktop Web sites look good (or at least good enough). Those same sites viewed on a BlackBerry or, worse, a RAZR, may be completely unreadable.

Although you can test your mobile site using online emulators (see Chapter 7), the best way is to hold a device in your hand so you can see how it feels and looks.

Visit a mobile phone store and be really nice to the salespeople while you test your sites on their phones. Better yet, compare notes with friends and family. Ask people to visit your Web site on different phones and watch what they do, how they find their way around (or where they get lost), and how hard it is for them to get to the information they need when they interact with your site.
Set Up Mobile Web Addresses

So that everyone with a mobile phone can easily get to the URL of your mobile site (by typing as little as possible), set up multiple mobile addresses and direct them all to the mobile version of your site.

Until a clear winner appears in the mobile URL game, use the most common addresses to increase the odds that your visitors find you on their first try.

The following are among the mobile addresses in common use on the mobile Web:

✓ m.yourdomain.com: Recommended for ease of typing
✓ wap.yourdomain.com: A common address for sites created using the WML, Wireless Markup Language
✓ yourdomain.com/mobile: Common alternative because of the easy server setup
✓ yourdomain.com/i: If you create a version specifically for the iPhone
✓ yourdomain.mobi: Requires registering the .mobi version of your domain name, which many sites don’t seem to bother with

Whatever you do, drop the www.— no one should ever have to type those three letters and that dot again on the modern Web.

Create a Virtual Demo or Showcase

Consider what’s most important for your audience. If you don’t have a physical location but want to use your mobile site to showcase your work, create a portfolio that displays well on a small screen. Then, the next time you’re at a party or business event, your mobile phone will be everything you (or your sales and marketing staff) need to give an impromptu demo of your products or services anywhere, anytime.

Location, Location, Location

Most people who surf the desktop Web are in an office, school, library, or cybercafé. Mobile Web surfers can be anywhere, including in front of your restaurant, office, or store, right now, or worse, lost on the road trying to find you.
As you consider how to design a mobile version of your Web site, consider not just how to make things smaller but also how to best present the information most likely to be useful to someone using a mobile device, wherever he is.

One of the most common uses of mobile phones is still the most obvious — making phone calls. So make sure your phone number is easy to find on the first screen of your mobile site, and include your street address and links to maps for those who may get lost on their way.

Including a link to a Google map is a great way to make it easy to find you, but for best results, make sure you link to the mobile version of Google Maps.

Both Yahoo! and Google let you prioritize searches for local matches on their mobile sites. Take the time to optimize your mobile site and make sure to include location-specific keywords, such as the names of the cities, states, and even local neighborhoods you serve.

**Optimize for Low Bandwidth**

The smaller screen size isn’t the only thing that limits how well you can display images and multimedia on a cellphone; bandwidth also places limits. Although a growing number of mobile users take advantage of the faster 3G and 4G networks, most are still restricted by very slow connections.

The same challenges of limited bandwidth that throttled the early Web slow the mobile Internet, which lags far behind the high-speed DSL and cable modem connections that are common ways to access the Internet from computers.

When you design the mobile version of your site, the following tips can help your site reach visitors with a low bandwidth:

- Get ruthless with your images and multimedia files, limiting your mobile site to a precious few images that help tell your story and adding visual interest.
- As you streamline your site, replace banners and button images with text links, which work on any device.
- Give careful consideration to how you include multimedia. For example, don’t put video or audio files on the front page of your mobile site. Instead, link to multimedia files so they’re optional for mobile browsers, and include warnings about how big the file is and how well it will display on different devices.
Follow the YouTube Mobile Video Model

Point any Internet-enabled device that supports video at www.youtube.com and you quickly see that the biggest site for video on the Web has made mobile a priority.

YouTube uses the MP4 video format for mobile users, and that makes all the difference between a video you can watch anywhere, anytime and a blank screen on mobile phones that don’t support Flash (a common video format used by YouTube only for desktop devices).

To fully appreciate YouTube’s mobile adaptability, compare the early iPhone model with one that runs on the new 3G network — YouTube delivers two versions of the same video to accommodate the bandwidth difference. The result is that YouTube videos look a bit choppy in their heavily compressed versions for mobile devices with limited bandwidth, but they don’t take all day to get there. On a fast 3G iPhone, the higher-resolution version of the same video plays smooth and clean over the faster connection.

Follow YouTube’s model when you add videos to your site and avoid video formats that aren’t well supported by mobile devices. If you want to make the process of publishing video to your site really easy, upload your videos to YouTube and then embed them into your mobile Web pages using their simple embed code — it’s as easy as copy and paste, and you can rest assured your videos will play on most mobile devices thanks to YouTube’s careful attention to the mobile Web. Already YouTube is starting to roll out video using the new HTML5 options covered in Chapter 5.

You find more information about video and other multimedia options in Chapter 8.

Follow Standards and Use Style Sheets

Desktop browsers, such as Firefox and Internet Explorer, are surprisingly forgiving when it comes to errors on Web pages. You can miss a close tag here or add an extra quotation mark there, and much of the time your pages still look okay.
Browsers that can handle code that’s not written quite correctly have to be
bigger programs with more complex code. You just can’t run a browser that
sophisticated on a mobile device. That’s why following standards and testing
your work carefully are more important than before you launch a mobile site.
You find tips and links to some great sites where you can test your pages in
Chapter 7.

Here are a few quick suggestions for creating clean, standards-based mobile
sites:

- **Separate content from style**: Use Cascading Style Sheets and well-writ-
ten semantic code to design clean pages that work well on many devices
(you find instructions in Chapters 4, 5, and 6).

- **Use alt tags behind images**: Alternative text is text that you include in
the alt attribute of the image tag (which we cover in Chapter 5). Alt text
displays when images are turned off or can’t be seen by the user. This
simple addition as you insert images into your pages helps ensure that
your designs are clear and understandable to everyone.

- **Use HTML heading tags**: The HTML heading tags `<h1>` through `<h6>`
are well-recognized tags that create a hierarchy of information on your
page. Your most important headline needs to be formatted with the
`<h1>` tag, your next level of headlines with the `<h2>` tag, and so on.

- **Follow the W3C mobile guidelines**: The World Wide Web Consortium
sets the standards for the Web, and they have a lot to say about design-
ning for mobile devices. Check out [www.w3.org/mobile](http://www.w3.org/mobile) to read more
about standards, and test your site in the validator at [http://validator.
w3.org/mobile/](http://validator.w3.org/mobile/).

- **Validate your code**: Mobile Web browsers are notoriously unforgiving
about errors in markup. To make sure your mobile site won’t fail to open
on a phone because of a typo or missing quotation mark, make sure
to run your URL through the W3C Validator at [http://validator.
w3.org](http://validator.w3.org).

**Don’t Make Anyone Type or Click Much**

Even on the best mobile devices, typing and clicking links can be a real chal-
lenge. Therefore, make links big and easy to click for mobile visitors, and
don’t overload any page with too many options.

The best approach is to lead users through a series of simple choices, limit-
ing the options to no more than five to seven big links at any stage, and direct
visitors to increasingly specific sets of links until they find the information
they need.
Avoid drop-down lists, or anything else that uses AJAX or JavaScript around links, because many mobile devices don’t support these advanced Web technologies, making these links impossible to use.

Some information, such as contact information, should never be more than one click away, and in many cases, including your phone number on the main page of your mobile site is good practice — after all, you know your visitor has a phone handy.

**Prepare for Fast Updates**

The Internet increased the speed with which people share news and gossip around the world, and the advent of the mobile Web has accelerated the rumor mill.

As you create a mobile Web site, make sure you build it in a way that’s easy to update, preferably from your mobile device and computer. There are many great online services that can help you update your Web site or blog using a mobile device. In Chapter 9 you find resources for blogging from a mobile device, and in Chapter 8 you find online services that make it easy to upload photos and post them automatically.

While you’re at it, make it easy for visitors to your site to send you information from their mobile phones as well. Services, such as Picasa, featured in Chapter 8, make it easy for anyone with the right login information to upload photos to your site. Picasa works with Google Maps so it can even add geocodes to photos to show exactly where the photos were taken.

The mobile Web provides a powerful vehicle for individuals, businesses, and organizations to present their side of any story and get the word out quickly when tragic events, bad press, and other crises arise. But don’t wait for an emergency to find out whether you’re prepared to add new information to your Web site quickly, and don’t fool yourself into thinking that just because you don’t manage a daily Internet newspaper, you don’t have to worry about speedy updates. Today, your staff and key constituents are more likely to have access to a mobile phone when disaster strikes than to a desktop computer. Don’t wait for an emergency to prepare — host a training session, set up a mobile phone emergency drill team, and make sure the people who matter to you are prepared to use mobile devices to coordinate efforts and collect information from the field today.