Catalyst POV on Mobile Search

Overview

Why is mobile search so important to your business? There are many reasons, beginning with the growth of mobile search as a popular and effective means of finding information and making online purchases on-the-go. In 2010, mobile searches accounted for 9% of all (160 billion) searches in the US with estimates for 2012 expected to reach 20%[1]. It is essential to not only create a mobile site to satisfy mobile search demands, but to create one that is specific to the mobile user and experience. If your products aren't properly promoted on your mobile site or if a particular section of the site is difficult to find or is poorly designed, then users will search elsewhere, thus severing the relationship and neglecting an opportunity for engagement and conversion. Loss of a customer or conversion could be a result of competitors providing a better mobile experience.

As compelling as mobile growth appears to be, devices that drive mobile web usage and mobile search, such as smartphones and tablets like the iPad, have not yet reached their tipping points in popularity. Smartphone sales aren't expected to eclipse traditional feature phone sales until later this year[2], and tablet sales won't outpace laptop sales until 2015[3]. With the increase in mobile users and mobile searches, to gain a competitive advantage it's imperative to provide properly formatted and mobile-friendly sites to convert mobile visitors into qualified leads and customers.

Researchers suggest that in no more than 5 years, mobile users will outnumber desktop computer users. It is important to capitalize on this growing trend—there is no better time to create an optimized mobile version of your business site than now.

Mobile Search Considerations

The following are factors to consider when planning your mobile-friendly site development:

- **Mobile Local**
  A recent study from Juniper Research[4] suggests that by 2014, 1.5 billion mobile users will be performing and using location-based local searches and information services. Research has shown that a majority of mobile users have a local objective and purchase intent in mind when performing a mobile search. Whether it is finding a restaurant, retail store, hotel, a movie theater, show time, or directions, usually the search intent is for a local result. Microsoft research suggests that local search intent percentage is over 50%, with 70% of those users likely to make a purchase in an hour from a query chain as opposed to a desktop search, where 70% of users in the same query chain will make their purchase in a week[5].

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[1] http://blog.performics.com/search/2010/12/was-2010-the-year-for-mobile-search.html
[2] http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/consumer/smartphones-to-overtake-feature-phones-in-u-s-by-2011/
[3] http://mashable.com/2011/01/05/forrester-tablet-sales/
[4] http://www.advertisingagencyblog.com/automotive-advertising/google-says-local-intent-is-behind-one-third-of-mobile-searches
[5] http://searchengineland.com/microsoft-53-percent-of-mobile-searches-have-local-intent-55556

- **Mobile Smartphone Market Share**

  US Smartphone market share in 2010 was dominated by Apple and the iPhone. However, as of March 2011, Apple's market share (25.2%) has been challenged and surpassed by the Android (33%) and the RIM Blackberry OS (28.9%)[6]. But a closer look at market share numbers including "all" devices suggest that the Apple iOS (operating systems) such as the iPhone, iPad, iPod Touches, and other devices have a significant advantage over Android like devices by 59% (37.9 million vs. 23.8 million)[7]. The numbers are impressive and market share for smartphone devices continue to increase and change every month, so it is important to format your mobile site for these devices while also considering the bandwidth limits for these networks.

- **Mobile mCommerce**

  Consumers no longer need to be in front of their desktop computer to make a purchase that satisfies their need for instant gratification—they now know this can be done easily and directly from their mobile devices, and are willing to pay for it. Forrester Research doesn't have a formal "m-commerce" revenue forecast, but in a 2010 survey the firm conducted with Shop.org, research showed that about 2% of online retail sales came from mobile. Given Forrester's estimate of $191 billion in online retail sales in 2010, estimates would amount to nearly $4 billion in sales via mobile in 2011. What's interesting about this? According to comScore[8], half of all smartphone owners conduct at least one search per month, 20% search once a week, and 11% search almost daily (which is about the same as the percentage of people who search on feature phones every month). Are you ready to increase sales by offering your products and services from a mobile platform?

- **Mobile Hispanic**

  February, 2010 data from a Nielsen[9] study showed that nearly a third (31%) of all mobile consumers in the United States owned smartphones. The study notes that penetration is even higher among Asians and Pacific Islanders (45%), US Hispanics (45%) and African-Americans (33%); US Hispanics being the largest majority. In the US Hispanics segment, 93% are using Google as their primary search engine, and 53% use search engines to shop and gather information on products. Seize the opportunity and target your consumer via the most effective channel.

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[6] http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Press_Releases/2011/4/comScore_Reports_February_2011_U.S._Mobile_Subscriber_Market_Share

[7] http://blogs.wsj.com/digits/2011/04/19/a-look-at-ipad-users-apple-still-trouncing-android/?mod=yahoo_hs

[8] http://techcrunch.com/2010/06/16/mobile-search-20-percent/

[9] http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/consumer/among-mobile-phone-users-hispanics-asians-are-most-likely-smartphone-owners-in-the-u-s/

- **Mobile Social**

  According to comScore, Facebook mobile users increased to 250 million in 2010 from 50 million in 2009— twice the amount of desktop users. Twitter mobile users grew by 25% year over year in 2010, with 40% of all Tweets coming from mobile sources[10]. Social media is one of the most prevalent and fastest-growing activities on mobile phones with US mobile social media users growing to 56% to lead all content categories[11].
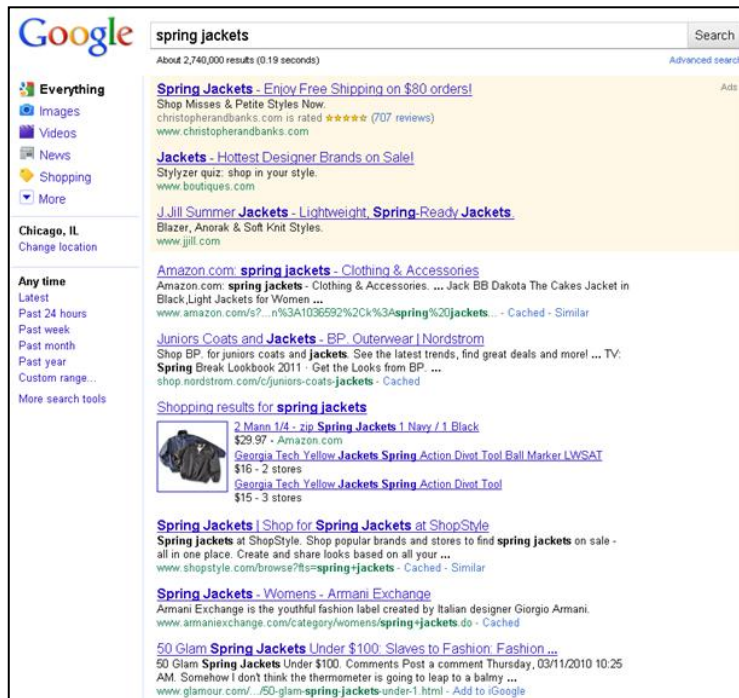
- **Mobile Paid Advertising**

  With limited browser space and search query results, owning your brand's mobile share-of-shelf space has become more difficult and competitive. Most Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs) only provide 1-2 paid listings and 2-3 organic listings (see Figure 1 below), cutting the desktop SERP experience in half. To maximize your brand's mobile visibility, paid search is an important strategy to incorporate. Research from Performics discovered that since 2009, mobile paid impressions and clicks have grown by over +238% and in 2011, it is expected that at least 10% of all paid search impressions and clicks will come from mobile[12].

Figure 1
Mobile Google SERP   **Desktop Google SERP**

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[10] http://www.scribd.com/doc/48586092/KPCB-Top-10-Mobile-Trends

[11] http://blog.comscore.com/2011/02/top_10_mobile_trends_2010.html

[12] http://www.internetretailer.com/2011/02/24/mobile-share-paid-search-impressions-clicks-surpass-10

Mobile & Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

A prime consideration in creating a mobile site is that mobile devices have different limitations and technologies to consider. Options for implementing a mobile site include:

- Hosting your mobile site on your Brand.com as a sub-domain (i.e. m.domain.com).
- Creating a unique site separate from the desktop version (i.e. www.domain-mobile.com), or a .mobi TLD (top level domain) which requires more maintenance due to management of two sites.
- Using Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) to deliver a mobile version of your desktop site. The CSS method has to be carefully built since, by default, it does not provide a specific unique mobile experience.
- Search engine transcoding is another option but leaving it up to the search engines to decipher your site's coding and decide the mobile experience for your customers is not a recommended option.

Device detection and User Agent Detection are also important features in how users find your site. These features help mobile users find the correct version of your site (mobile) and format it to the user's operating system and device.
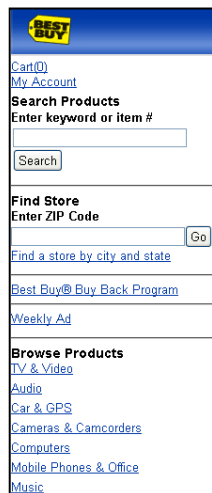
To enhance the mobile user experience, here are a few best practices among many to keep in mind:

- Avoid Flash design, Flash elements, and JavaScript as two of the most dominant mobile devices, the iPhone and iPad, do not support Adobe Flash[13] (*there is no expectation that they will support the technology in the coming years[7]*)
- Limit the use and amount of images due to load time and data usage

To engage users, specific content and calls to action are imperative as mobile users are more likely to purchase and require specific information immediately as opposed to desktop users. Mobile screen sizes are a fraction of their desktop counterparts so content and links must accommodate this limitation. An excellent example of this is the Best Buy mobile website, which provides a specific mobile experience. Unique from the desktop version, the mobile site does not include Flash or unnecessary images, and provides direct calls to action (see Figure 2 on the following page).

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[13] http://www.apple.com/hotnews/thoughts-on-flash/

Figure 2
Best Buy Mobile Site   **Best Buy Desktop Site**
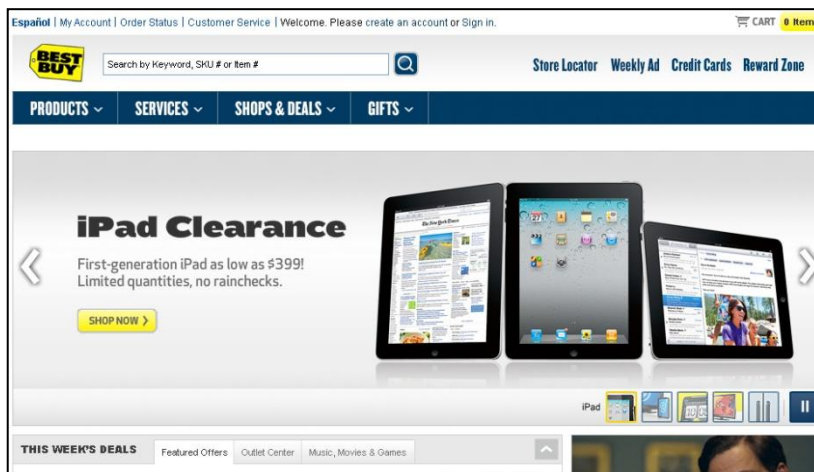
Mobile Search Engines

Google currently owns over 98% of the mobile search engine market share, with Yahoo! and Bing combining for just under 1.5% and all other engines at less than .5%.[14] Unlike paid search, currently the mobile organic search results within Google are very similar to the desktop search results but with local searches varying quite differently. Matt Cutts from Google has revealed that Google is currently creating a unique algorithm for Google Mobile that is development and will be released in the near future[15]. With the growing development of mobile search and technology and the eventual creation of specific algorithms for mobile to be introduced, it's important to create a mobile site to be ahead of the competition for mobile-specific site authority and relevant content.

Mobile Conclusion

Most mobile users are looking for easy access to immediate and reliable information. Without the proper optimization and creation of a mobile site for your business, users may become frustrated at the limited ease with which they can derive information or execute an action. Mobile SEO is an opportunity to expand your brand's reach and engagement. Keeping pace with evolving search trends is essential to capturing interested users and converting them to satisfied customers.

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[14] http://royal.pingdom.com/2010/07/29/google-undisputed-heavyweight-champion-of-mobile-search/
[15] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mY9h3G8Lv4k