Responsive design and its role in your ecommerce website plan

Practical advice and technical tips to speed your move to multi-channel commerce
INTRODUCTION

Today, mobility is the way to go. The explosion of smartphones and tablets means that your current and potential customers are just as likely to be accessing your ecommerce website from their mobile devices as from a traditional desktop or laptop computer.

Is your online store meeting this growing demand for mobile accessibility? Or is it time to revisit your ecommerce strategy to better support mobile users? In many cases, incorporating responsive design into your web development plans might be the answer because it eliminates the need for a traditional ecommerce website and a mobile website.

Before you leap ahead though, it is important to determine when and if responsive design fits your ecommerce website plans and your customers’ browsing and buying habits.

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Go mobile faster with responsive web design

Mobile mania. Couch commerce. Whatever you call it, today’s consumers are going mobile at a rapid clip and using devices like smartphones and tablets to browse and purchase online. In fact, sessions in shopping apps on iOS and Android increased by a whopping 174% year-over-year; on Android alone, the shopping category increased by 220%.¹

That’s a lot of potential customers ready to grab their mobile devices and do some shopping. Yet only 9% of websites are ready for mobile in 2012, according to Mongoose Metrics, a tracking and analysis firm.

Is your online store meeting this growing demand for mobile accessibility? Or is it a barrier to tapping this burgeoning market?

If it’s time to revisit your ecommerce strategy to better support mobile users, then incorporating responsive design into your web development plans might be the answer – because it eliminates the need for a traditional ecommerce website and a mobile website.

Responsive design defined

Responsive design implies that website design and development should respond to your customers’ behavior and device based on screen size, platform and orientation.

While not really a new approach to web design, it solves many of the design challenges caused by the proliferation of new types of mobile devices because the result is a website design that stretches, minimizes or removes content based on the user’s screen size, whether that screen is a desktop monitor, smartphone or tablet. For instance if a customer chooses to view your ecommerce site using their smartphone, all of the content will realign to fit the available space.

Responsive design consists of a mix of flexible grids and layouts, images and an intelligent use of Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) media queries. As the user switches from a laptop to a tablet, your ecommerce website automatically switches to accommodate for resolution, image size and scripting abilities. In other words, the website has the technology to automatically respond to the user’s preferences.

Need Convincing?

- Consumers are 51% more likely to purchase from retailers that have mobile-specific websites
- 57% of consumers will not recommend a business with a poorly designed mobile site
- 40% of consumers will go to a competitor’s site after a bad mobile experience

Sources: Compuware 2012; NRF 2011
The web page detects the visitor’s screen size and orientation and then changes the layout accordingly. This means you no longer need a separate design and development phase for each new gadget on the market. Instead, you design a site once and format it differently for many devices, freeing you from having to create and maintain countless custom-made solutions for each new category of users. In addition to saving time, you also decrease the development costs of adding a separate mobile application to your ecommerce strategy. (See the accompanying glossary for the definition of more terms related to responsive web design.)

Incorporating responsive design sooner than later: 5 business reasons

Consumer buying habits have clearly shifted. No longer is mobile shopping deemed “risky.” In fact, nearly half of digital shoppers at the top 10 retailers are mobile-only², and the global mobile payment transaction market is expected to register a compound annual growth rate of 39.2% from 2015 to 2020³. Incorporating responsive design into your ecommerce website ensures you will efficiently reach a wider audience that will spend more time shopping in your online store. Consider this scenario: a customer is walking the aisles of your physical store. They see what they want but for various reasons (no cash on hand, prefer the convenience of home delivery, etc.), an easy mobile experience encourages them to use their smartphone to connect to your website and order the goods. The lesson? The easier the mobile experience, the more likely they are to make that purchase on the spot.

So is now the time to rethink your ecommerce website strategy with the mobile user experience in mind? It is if your business is looking to:

- **Save time and cut costs** – Introducing responsive design into your ecommerce site means you no longer have to create and maintain two separate websites – your traditional online store plus a mobile app. The time, resource and cost savings can add up quickly.

- **Improve overall operational efficiency** – With one website design to support all of the devices your customers use to connect to your online store, you significantly limit duplicate efforts and simplify maintenance. Furthermore you can create integrated analytics reports based on a single set of KPIs (key performance indicators) across all devices, enhancing efficiency and providing insight into multi-channel effectiveness.

- **Create a consistent user experience** – A consistent appearance across devices allows customers to more easily navigate your online store, which can lead to quicker checkouts and increased sales. Plus consistent URLs add to your SEO scores – an added bonus.
• **Increase conversions** – Supporting multiple devices allows customers to browse and shop where, when and how they choose, which makes them more likely to (a) make a purchase; (b) purchase multiple items; and (c) return to your site multiple times.

• **Be future focused** – The key technologies for responsive design, including HTML5 and CSS3 media queries, are developing standards that can serve as your building blocks for future web applications. That means your online store can be ready for the next generation of mobile devices, ensuring customers continue to flock to your online store.

### Start with your current ecommerce strategy and go from there

Frequently we are asked the question, “So how do I get started in our move to responsive web design?” We advise starting with where you are today. Analyze the purchasing styles of your customers. Understand which devices they are using to access your site. Estimate the investment required for responsive design – time, resources and cost. Then begin your planning.

**Do you already have a mobile strategy?** If you already have a mobile design and/or mobile app in place, you are probably maintaining two versions of your ecommerce site — one for the desktop browser and the other for mobile access. One option would be to implement some initial responsive design techniques to integrate the desktop and mobile versions into a single site design.

**Are you in the early stages of setting and implementing your mobile strategy?** If you don’t have a mobile ecommerce strategy in place, this is the ideal time to consider responsive design. You can leverage your existing ecommerce site and/or approach a redesign that meets the need of all connection types – desktop via browser or mobile via smartphone or tablet.

### When responsive design may not be the right choice, right now

It’s okay. Responsive website design is not a one-size-fits-all solution for every ecommerce or mobile site. Weigh your options carefully and beware of hype. Keep in mind that responsive design may not be the best approach for you if, for example:

- Your website is too detailed or complicated
- Your navigation menu is complex
- Your site is primarily image-driven with minimal use of text
- Your users or customers need access to all of the content at all times
Although responsive design can certainly address these characteristics and requirements, the costs are often higher and planning and development can take longer.

**Technical tips for successful responsive web design**

The goal is simple: You want to make it easy for as many people as possible to access your online store and make purchases no matter what device they are using. And you want to achieve that goal as quickly and cost efficiently as possible.

Responsive web design is evolving rapidly to fit this need. And while there are no established best practices, it’s a fast-growing effort with an enthusiastic web development community to support it.

Keeping the following tips in mind will help you avoid some common pitfalls:

- **Usability and design:** Not every feature in your non-mobile webstore needs to be included in the mobile version. Choose which features to omit based on simplicity and ease of use – anything that impedes a customer’s purchasing journey via their mobile device is probably non-essential. However make sure key elements of your online store – such as the main navigation menu, logo, shopping cart and privacy information – are clearly visible in all versions of your ecommerce site.

- **Videos and flash:** We advise not incorporating Flash elements with your responsive site design. Flash is not supported by Apple mobile devices like the iPhone and iPad. Also mobile Flash has been discontinued and devices that do support it may not be perfectly optimized.

- **Data protection and security policies:** As you increasingly support your mobile customers, make sure both your data and your customers’ data are protected and secure.

- **The customers’ point of view:** Customers expect their mobile shopping experience to be as fast, or even faster, than their desktop shopping experiences. Be sure you are not sacrificing speed as you move to responsive design techniques.

**Ready to go? First partner wisely**

For most companies, sooner rather than later is a good time to incorporate responsive web design into their combined ecommerce and mobile strategy. In most cases, it is an affordable implementation model that you can do relatively quickly.

You might not want to go it alone, however. When choosing a development partner, pay close attention to their level of responsive design expertise. Look for a partner who is clearly familiar with
the latest technologies and trends. You don’t want your ecommerce site to be their “test case” for responsive web design experience. Once you have selected an experienced partner, begin the development. Your business will enjoy the resulting cost- and time-savings, and your customers – who really don’t care how they connect to your online store, as long as it is fast and easy – will have an enjoyable shopping experience. Which means they are more likely to return.

Summary

Before you make the final decision to incorporate responsive web design into your ecommerce site, take the time to do your homework. Review the pros and cons, the advantages, pitfalls and technical requirements that come with responsive design. When implemented properly, it can take your website to the next level. But remember that it is not for every situation, thorough planning, analysis, and consulting are needed to make the correct decision. Also be sure to consider the online purchasing habits of your customers.

Armed with insights and information, you can move ahead to incorporate responsive design when, how and if it is truly the best fit for your business and your customers. Along the way, if you choose to implement responsive design with the help of a partner, remember to look for one with proven experience in this area, which will in turn bring you more satisfactory results and a significant return on investment.

Glossary: know your responsive design terms

**Cascading style sheet (CSS):** Used to define the look and feel of a website outside of the actual HTML file(s) of the site. As part of responsive web design, CSS replaces tables and other HTML-based methods for formatting and laying out websites. A primary benefit to using CSS is the simplification of a site’s HTML files (which can actually increase search engine rankings) and the ability to completely change the style of a site by changing just one file, without having to make changes to content.

**CSS Framework:** A CSS framework is a collection of CSS files used as the starting point to make XHTML and CSS web sites quickly and painlessly. They usually contain CSS styles for typography and layout.

**Hypertext Markup Language (HTML):** This is the primary language used to write web pages. HTML is intended as a way to provide content on websites (with CSS handling the layout and stylistic options), though it can also be used to determine how that content is displayed.

**HTML5:** Designed to provide a comprehensive application development platform for Web pages to
eliminate the need to install third-party browser plug-ins such as Java and Flash. HTML5 provides support for 2D graphics, document editing, drag and drop, browser history management, video playback and local file storage. HTML5 consolidates and formalizes existing coding methods; for example, certain layout tags are no longer permitted in the body of a page, requiring them to be defined in a CSS style sheet.
About The Author

OSF Global Services delivers the technologies, customization and experience that help online retailers expand business globally, increase conversion rates and enable their webstore. Our forte is customizing and seamlessly integrating ecommerce environments, from the webstore to legacy applications to front-end and back office systems. Headquartered in Quebec, Canada, OSF has offices in the U.S., Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, UK, Romania and Ukraine.

For information on how OSF Global Services can help with your ecommerce requirements, please contact us at info@osf-global.com, call us at (888) 548-4344, or go to www.osf-global.com.

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1 Khalaf, Simon. Shopping, Productivity and Messaging Give Mobile Another Stunning Growth Year; Flurry; January 6, 2015

2 Siwicki, Bill. Nearly half of digital shoppers at the top 10 retailers are mobile-only; Internet Retailer, March 9, 2015