

Making mobiles usable

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Mobile usability differs from desktop usability in a number of ways. The screens are tiny, making it difficult to view text and graphics used on a standard desktop. On most modern keypad phones, only one page can be displayed at a time. Nokia's, RIM's, Apple's, and others' newest large display touch screen phones feature the option to view one whole page, though often at a drastically reduced type size. Fault-prone data transfer is slow and not only do people have short attention spans, they often need the information urgently: while desktop web users surf for enjoyment, mobile web users hunt for information. Input methods, too, are awkward especially on the newest touch screen devices.

The iPhone and its competitors use animations to cover up an underlying inconsistent and awkward user interface. This 'lipstick on a pig' approach is unfortunately quite common and distracts from the underlying usability challenges faced by consumers. Delete buttons are all over the place. Back functionality is inconsistent (sometimes upper left, otherwise not available). Sometimes things zoom left and right, other times they zoom up and down. Sometimes things just require too many steps to complete, even such frequently used features as sending a text message and checking a contact's details. The number of steps in sexy new touch screen phones has increased rather than decreased.

Animation on mobile screens provides customer delight and creates new opportunities for usability, but it frequently has the unfortunate side effect of confusing users. Key problems in animated user interfaces are:

- ◆ Where did I come from?
- ◆ How do I get back there?
- ◆ What can I do on this screen?
- ◆ What is the active part of the display? (What is the focus?)

Although phones have bigger, better cameras with 5-megapixels standard, it is too difficult to transfer photos to a computer or via MMS or email - apart from a few exceptions: photo and music transfer are the magical strengths of the iPhone, but notorious weaknesses of competitor products.

Application stores on the phones are finally being well done and are a promising user experience opportunity. Standard headphone jacks are smart - and they should be on the top of the phone, not the left, right, or bottom.

Mapping and location awareness has reached a new level of customer value and usability. Presence, direction, and speed are all coming to phones in 2009. Google Maps leads in usability for base mapping applications but navigation applications are a different story. Surprisingly, Google Maps is most usable on the Blackberry devices, providing nearly instant GPS 'find me' and also direction of movement. The iPhone lags behind the Blackberry in this area.

Instead of trying to deliver every capability, companies would do better to adopt a customer-driven approach by creating content and functionality with specific mobile users in mind. They should include five key steps in the design cycle:

1. Define your target audience
2. Speak to your target audience about their current phones
3. Ask your target users their hopes and dreams in their next phone
4. Design for users' hopes and dreams
5. Solicit user feedback to the designs: carry out usability testing

As consumers get tired of bad touch screens, QWERTY phones will pick up demand. However, it remains to be seen whether touch+QWERTY will be the winning combination. ❖

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