Getting Mobile’s Signal

No, this is not another column instructing publishers to extend their brands to mobile. I think that case has been made already to almost all parties on the consumer side and to an increasing number of business information providers. At this early stage, everyone’s degree of commitment varies, of course, because no one really knows what sort of revenue streams will evolve. Some publishers just repurpose their RSS feeds for mobile access; others have third-party providers cherry-pick website content to reshape it for the small screen. Only a handful of publishers—Bloomberg, USA TODAY, ESPN, Weather.com, and AP News—have dedicated and aggressive mobile strategies in place. It feels like 1997 all over again.

Rather than encourage publishers to extend themselves onto mobile, I think it is time we started thinking about how the lessons of mobile publishing, revenue generation, and marketing will eventually inform how we generally do business online.

Core competency: Get ready to be humbled by your mobile site as it tells you just how little of your content users really need. While many mobilized websites simply dump their content indiscriminately onto a mobile site, I believe the most effective brands will edit themselves ruthlessly and, in the process, dare to discover their core value proposition. When conservative news magazine publisher Newsmax launched its mobile site recently, it was surprised to find that among all of those aggregated headlines it pours onto handsets, the area that collects and links to conservative columnists around the web was among the most popular. Collecting personalities was a core competency. The superbly focused AgProfessional.com mobile site presents three main choices at the homepage: news, real-time commodities market prices, and vendors’ new products listings. Three lines, three links, and you are out of there. Publishers may not like what mobile tells them about the marginal utility of some of their own content, but they’d best get ready to listen.

Clarity, not clutter: While related to my first observation, this has as much to do with information design as overall load. There are at least three content brands I actually prefer accessing on my phone to their corresponding websites: Facebook, Weather.com, and USA TODAY. All three of these publishers have fine web experiences, but they deliver better on mobile. They give me quicker access to what I want on a handset. As major brands see more of their traffic access basic information from their phones, you have to wonder what effect it will have on the architecture of their web destinations.

Respectfully target: Click-through rates on mobile advertising continue to be multiples higher than for web banners. This is not solely a function of early-days novelty and of newbies clicking just to see what they get. The effectiveness of mobile advertising so far reminds us of something the web left behind cons ago: share of voice, targeting, and lack of clutter. Stuffing webpages with countless banner ad networks and performance-based add-ons undermines the effectiveness of digital advertising. For all the technology and rich media we throw at it, web ads still lack relevance and compelling presentation. Mobile screens force us to target (finally) because users will revolt from getting banner blasts and clutter on their phones. Relevance really does matter here, and this may be the medium that at long last teaches us to use location, contextual/behavioral targeting, and focused attention to make digital advertising truly impactful.

Personalization now, personalization forever: How long have we heard about consumer-in-control customization online with little evidence of personalization taking hold? Have you seen the malleable menus on iPhone apps such as Creamer’s Mining Weekly, AP News Network, or IGN.com? Each publisher lets you assemble your own specific feeds. This is the future in mobile, and it should be the future for the web as well. Let users make their own sites from your content ... please?

Many of the items that have lingered on the digital to-do list become unavoidable.

Mobile will not just extend the web. Because it turns web luxuries of brevity, service, user-control, and relevance into indispensable imperatives, it has the potential to help discipline everything we do digitally.