Designing for the Digital Consumer: How to Adapt a Design to Mobile UX

When it comes to designing consumer-focused mobile platforms, optimizing your User Experience (UX) requires a shift in your thinking.

With the increased use of smartphones to access the web and accomplish other tasks that consumers previously would have done on a desktop, digital experiences must be either designed for, or adapted to, the mobile environment. This means organizations need to better understand how to create a great mobile user experience (UX). A user's journey and design needs differ on mobile devices, tablets, and desktops. From what users want to accomplish on different devices to how to make them accessible and usable, the design processes for each have different challenges to solve and needs to address.

Many companies and government entities simply reproduce or adapt their desktop experience to a mobile environment—which isn't always the best strategy. A better approach would be to rethink information hierarchies based on different mobile user needs and goals. Creating a seamless, engaging mobile UX also often requires user research, creating frameworks such as journey maps, and site testing. It is essential for organizations to devote time to understanding their users' and other stakeholders' mobile needs.

Organizations would benefit from a more holistic approach to mobile design. There are tangible advantages to evolving the way that you think about design to ensure the experience is optimized for your users.

The core design considerations that organizations should use to guide their mobile web development are:

| Ease of Use | Mobile Design Parameters | User-driven Development | Simplified Design | Accessibility and Usability |

Current vs. Ideal Mobile Design Mindset

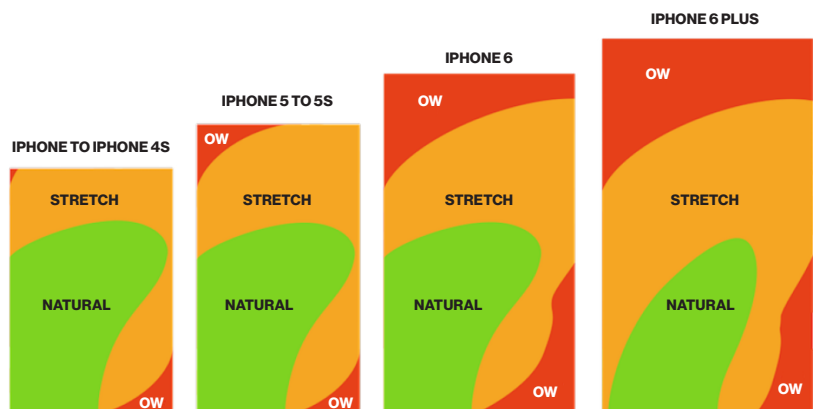| Current Mindset	Ideal Mindset
Mobile design is an afterthought.	Mobile design requires its own strategy and budget.
There is no need to alter the desktop design for mobile.	You need to design mobile experiences separately.
Mobile sites don't require all major functionalities.	Mobile sites should have all the functionality users want or need on mobile.
User research for the desktop site applies to mobile.	You need to conduct mobile-centric user research.
Users can access a desktop if the mobile site doesn't meet their needs.	Some users' only access point to a site is their smartphone or tablet.
Mobile site usability is less important than having a similar appearance to the desktop site.	Mobile usability should be the primary objective of mobile site design.
User needs and goals are the same on mobile and desktop.	You need to understand mobile users' needs and goals.

Ease of Use

There are a number of considerations to think through to ensure ease of use for your mobile experience. In your thought process, it's essential to include everything from familiarity with past designs to providing a seamless experience across devices.

Mobile UX design derives from previous user models: While you may want to design a uniquely mobile experience, users bring expectations of layouts, jargon, and touch gestures from current desktop, mobile, and tablet UX to your site. Thus, you should design for mobile in a way that is still familiar to the user.

Smaller screens equal different interactions: Ease of use should be placed at the forefront of mobile design. That means designing for a smaller screen in ways that reflect how people hold and interact with a phone.

Thumb Zone Map: As mobile screens become larger in size, the thumb's stretch-zone and hard-to-reach "ow" zones expand, while the "natural" zone that a thumb can reach stays roughly the same.

Source: How to design for thumbs in the Era of Huge Screens (scotthurff.com)

IPHONE TO IPHONE 4S — OW / STRETCH / NATURAL / OW

IPHONE 5 TO 5S — OW / STRETCH / NATURAL / OW

IPHONE 6 — OW / STRETCH / NATURAL / OW

IPHONE 6 PLUS — OW / STRETCH / NATURAL / OW

Mobile Design Parameters

One of the most important parts of thinking through a mobile design project is fully understanding the contexts in which people use, or will use, your mobile site. Not considering these factors could potentially lead to designs that aren't fully usable by your stakeholders. **A holistic design approach integrates the following factors:**

Culture: It's vital to think through all the social, legal, and economic aspects of culture in the context of mobile design. For example, legally you will need to comply with all relevant web design requirements, including those outlined in the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act. The economic context of your users would influence what kind of devices they're using to access your site and the quality of their internet connection. Generational uses of technology and approaches to mobile might also inform your design.

Environment: Environmental factors relate to where your users primarily access your mobile site. They include factors like noise, lighting, weather, time of day, and privacy. For example, if your site is often accessed on public transit or while waiting in line at the store, you might want to skip auto-play videos or mute the sound and provide subtitles.

Activity: What are your users doing while accessing your site? Are they walking, working, standing in line, or sitting? This is important because it affects how you design your mobile experience.

Goals: Why are users accessing your mobile site? What is the end goal of your users? Are they seeking entertainment or social interaction? Perhaps they're task-focused? Making sure your mobile UX aligns with their usage goals is crucial.

Attention Span: When users are accessing your mobile app, what is the length and quality of their attention span? Are they giving you sporadic or full attention? Are users on the go or at home? Users are more likely to devote only partial attention to mobile sites compared to desktop sites. How might that impact your design?

Tasks: What tasks are your users trying to accomplish on your site? It's essential to make a list of all the things they need and want to do, such as send messages, pay bills, file taxes, or find an answer to a problem. This can impact the information architecture and navigation of the site.

Device Type: It's also important to understand what kinds of devices users are using. Whether they're accessing your site via Android or iOS, on a tablet or mobile phone in addition to which operating system release they're using, will matter when designing functionalities and accessibility features.

Connectivity: You would design differently for a user base that primarily lives in rural areas without access to high-speed internet than for users in urban areas with access to fast, reliable broadband. Similarly, if most of your users are using data to access your site or might not be able to afford fast broadband connections, you want to make sure that you minimize how much data must load.

Overview:
Key Mobile Design Parameters

When designing for mobile, you should consider the following factors:

Culture

Environment

Activity

Goals

Attention Span

Device Type

Connectivity

Designing Mobile UX Based on User Needs

Due to mobile designs often being streamlined versions of a desktop digital experience, it's crucial that organizations tap into user needs to drive development. Not doing so could make it harder for users to accomplish key tasks on your mobile site.

A seamless experience: Users want to use multiple devices to access your site without having to completely relearn how to navigate your offerings. It's important that mobile experiences include desktop services as well as other services like GPS software. User information should also be equally accessible through all versions of your site. For example, if users begin filling out forms on your site from a desktop, they should be able log on through the mobile app to continue where they left off.

No disruption or distraction: Users do not respond well to constant interruptions or distractions. Design must fit into a user's life rather than distract from their experience with too much dynamic content crammed into a smaller screen or constant changes they have to relearn.

Support and documentation: Providing support and documentation that is searchable and easy to find is crucial for the long-term success of any product, whether software or hardware. Users want autonomy and control. If necessary, it's essential to help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from mistakes independently.

Emergency exits: Users need clearly marked exits from accidental pages or unwanted actions. This saves them from having to perform an entire process twice. "Emergency exits" give users freedom if they're clearly labeled and discoverable.

Simplified Design

Mobile requires a simplified design—and that's often the hardest part of designing for this format. Simplifying your design may seem easy, but, in reality, it takes great skill. The user expects a full experience whether on a large or small device. Designers must figure out how to create the same robust functionality, calls to action, or dense content on smaller devices despite having less area to do so.
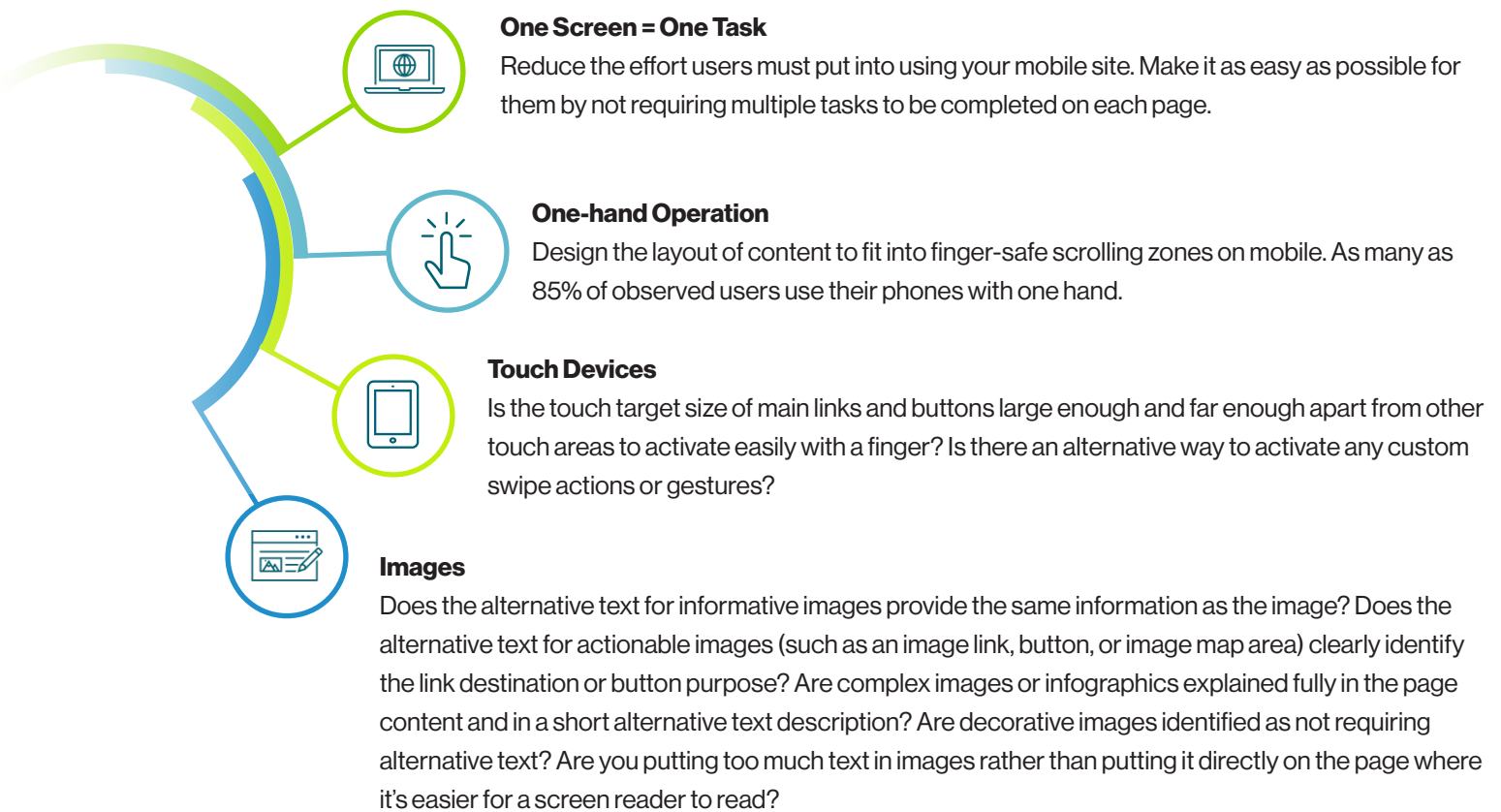
Simplify the Design
Remove unnecessary text and elements. This allows users to focus on critical actions, content, and key information.

Use White Space
Space without print or pictures creates breathing room for design elements, aiding in readability and content prioritization. It also simplifies your user interface while improving the overall UX.

Accessibility and Usability

In a mobile experience, accessibility and usability are front and center. The smaller screen and different ways people of all abilities use mobile devices mean that thinking through how your site will be used and accessed is critical. Not focusing on usability and accessibility could mean your users will either struggle to use your site or not be able to use your site at all. Creating inclusive designs that people with disabilities will actually like, find useful, and which are well-suited to their needs requires shifting your mindset away from doing just the bare minimum.

One Screen = One Task
Reduce the effort users must put into using your mobile site. Make it as easy as possible for them by not requiring multiple tasks to be completed on each page.

One-hand Operation
Design the layout of content to fit into finger-safe scrolling zones on mobile. As many as 85% of observed users use their phones with one hand.

Touch Devices
Is the touch target size of main links and buttons large enough and far enough apart from other touch areas to activate easily with a finger? Is there an alternative way to activate any custom swipe actions or gestures?

Images
Does the alternative text for informative images provide the same information as the image? Does the alternative text for actionable images (such as an image link, button, or image map area) clearly identify the link destination or button purpose? Are complex images or infographics explained fully in the page content and in a short alternative text description? Are decorative images identified as not requiring alternative text? Are you putting too much text in images rather than putting it directly on the page where it's easier for a screen reader to read?

Organizations that can shift how they approach mobile UX design are often able to leverage their mobile design to achieve significant return on investment. Whether from more satisfied users or users able to accomplish more on mobile, a better approach to mobile design often pays dividends.

Guidehouse's CX and UX strategy teams are equipped to help businesses and federal entities think through their mobile UX needs and create design strategies that will drive results. Guidehouse consultants have significant experience working on government and commercial UX projects through a lens that integrates human-centered design, strategy, and change management to ensure mobile projects are successful and optimized for your use case and business goals.

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