

Device Innovation Is Passé: Why UE Is King in 2013

Jeff Glueck, CEO of Skyfire

It's getting increasingly difficult for smartphone and tablet makers to "shock and awe" the media and the buying public with groundbreaking, "never before seen" hardware. While each high-profile device launch brings hardware advancements over previous models, the discussion tends to quickly shift to experience-centric items like Facebook integration and pre-loaded Instagram.

If this year's CTIA show is anything like the recent Mobile World Congress and CES events, the "coming out parties" for the newest and sleekest devices on the market will really just be more of the same when it comes to form factors and features. So, if the innovation isn't to be found in the mobile device design itself, where is it? It is in the mobile user experience, and in helping consumers easily reach the services that enrich their lives more quickly and more elegantly than ever before.

We're only beginning to see what a mobile-first design philosophy can bring to the devices that have become such an integral part of daily life. The world of apps started us on this path, and the evolution of mobile browsers, HTML5-rendered websites, and the clever embedding of services within the OS (such as Android's and later iOS' pull-down notification screen) furthered it.

The next wave in innovation, as I see it, relegates the device itself to a secondary position as a platform for bringing both native and web-based applications and services together. This is likely to play out in the mobile browser first.

The browser is the most popular "app" on any device. It's also rapidly becoming the place consumers go first to discover content, to digitally socialize with friends, to share, and even to shop. In some countries this phenomenon has completely leapfrogged desktop usage. In India, for instance, total mobile browsing surpassed desktop browsing way back in May 2012. Other countries are certain to follow this trend.

Simply re-creating the desktop "surfing" experience won't work on mobile, but that's what we're working with today. Consumers deserve better. What the comparatively small-screen mobile user truly needs, and what they'll rapidly begin to find as the concept of "mobile browser extensions" hits the mainstream, is the ability to dip in and out of content rapidly and as needed, without ever leaving the

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page they're on. Extensions allow them to do this in an eye-pleasing, minimal-clicking manner. For example, finding a discount code for a shopping site you're browsing, or a downloadable app related to a topic on a blog you're reading shouldn't mean interrupting your browsing session. Instead, a simple overlay should allow you to link straight through to that parallel experience and be done with it, or instead easily return to the page at hand.

Moreover, a rich mobile user experience becomes possible when the user's context is transparently discerned by a rich, algorithmic combination of URL, keywords and browsing history. This allows the user, should they choose to call up the embedded extension toolbar within their browser, to easily find shopping deals or promotion codes on the retail site they're perusing, or a list of related apps to download that are contextually recommended based on the page URL and other characteristics. Picture a user on the REI site who clicks a toolbar button called Apps, and calls up an overlaid list of hiking, skiing, running and sportswear applications in a matter of seconds.

The browser can now elegantly behave like a single app, or a vast collection of apps. Rather than being the same browser that every other Tom, Dick & Sherri uses, it's personalized, infinitely customizable, and it evolves to meet each user's very unique social and browsing habits. This is the sort of innovation that actually enriches daily user experience in 2013.

We'll absolutely see plenty of me-too devices at CTIA and the rest of this year, and many of them will be amazingly cool. The real quantum leaps, however, will come from a marriage of value-added apps and services with a mobile-first, browser-based user experience that greatly values each consumer's time, their appreciation for elegant design, and above all, their individuality.

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