

COLUMNS

Reactions to Google's mobile-friendly search changes

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Tyler Klein is vice president for North American user experience lead at Rosetta

By [Tyler Klein](#) and [Jason Tabeling](#)

On Nov. 18, Google's mobile search division announced upcoming algorithmic changes to the way it recognizes responsive mobile Web sites. According to the search giant's blog, the shift is but the first step in providing mobile users with a more valuable, quality Web experience across devices.

Mobile user experience is undoubtedly becoming a fast-growing phenomenon that countless brands have yet to master. While many brands are aware that this change is happening, they have yet to reach a tipping point forcing them to change their approach.

Designs on future

Google's new focus on mobile users will catalyze this trend and standardize how brands interact with their consumers in ways that go far beyond their search strategy.

As Google implements this change globally over the next several weeks, brands will be forced to re-evaluate their current omnichannel strategy and redefine their approach to digital.

Success in doing so will be key to retaining existing share of voice and acquiring new market share a mandatory requirement for most brands. At the most basic level, brands will shift their mobile strategy towards responsive Web design.

Responsive Web design (RWD) solutions leverage a single site including content, functionality and back-end code and then style the front-end in a way that fits the user's screen.

In this way, both desktop and mobile experiences offer the exact same functionality, just adjusted to fit the constraints of the screen. This practice has long-term benefits for brands because only one site needs to be maintained instead of two.

In many ways, Google's change is good news for consumers since it will force mobile laggards into an increasingly mobile-preferred Internet. Indeed, a staggering 70 percent of Walmart's digital holiday sales this year came from mobile devices.

There is a clear shift in user preference towards mobile, and Google's recent change will apply significant pressure to move sites toward RWD, which in turn will enhance the overall usability of the Internet.

Yet recommendations for achieving omnichannel success go far beyond RWD.

Unlike a desktop computer, mobile devices can be used just about anywhere. Before rushing for RWD gold, brands

must first have a deep understanding of their customers' functional needs and content priorities and, more importantly, the contexts in which their mobile site will be used.

Context of use

While Google is now making it easier to interact with brands on a smaller screen, it is critical to remember that screen size is not the only differentiating factor between desktop and mobile experiences.

Because of how they are used, mobile sites must support highly task-focused experiences that can be completed in a short period of time, often as part of a larger experience that transcends the device e.g., looking up your gate while walking through the airport or comparing product reviews while in store prior to purchase.

Desktop sites, on the other hand, luxuriate in focused user attention and thus can offer more content-rich, experiential interfaces.

For Google, content is still king

Google's search rankings will always value content. And in an evolving landscape where brands must become customer-obsessed to thrive, fresh, meaningful content that adds value is and will remain king.

While Google hints that "we are also experimenting with using the mobile-friendly criteria as a ranking signal," the brands with the highest number of links, social mentions and page ranking are those that seamlessly maintain engaging, relevant and personal experiences for customers across both desktop and mobile device.

Usability drives quality score, thus making the two interlinked.

Balancing content with usability

Responsive solutions intricately connect desktop and mobile experiences at a content and functional level, allowing one experience to seamlessly morph into the other purely through visual and layout changes.

Moreover, Google's focus on content in ranking sites applies to both mobile and desktop.

Together, this means that responsively designed experiences will have to provide access to the same content on both mobile and desktop variations even if that content is a hindrance in the task-driven world of mobile.

Fully understanding the method by which Google qualifies a site as a "good experience" will be critical to balancing a great user experience with high search rankings.

To support truly user centric experiences, brands will have to find ways to prioritize content and functionality based on the user's context without upsetting "the algorithm."

Still, the interaction design of a responsive solution will always be far superior to that of the desktop-site-on-a-phone experience. This way, Google is driving positive change for consumers.

THE SHIFT TO mobile-friendly Web sites will not happen overnight, but it is a shift that brands must embrace in the coming year.

If your site is not mobile optimized, your rankings will suffer.

Understanding Google's standards, combined with a deep understanding of your customer, will be critical in successfully making this transition.

Tyler Klein is vice president for North American user experience lead at [Rosetta](#), Cleveland, OH. Reach him at tyler.klein@rosetta.com.