THE RISE OF THE TABLET
within eCommerce

TRINITYINSIGHT

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Why Optimize for the Tablet?

Meeting Demand

The advent of the tablet and the rate at which tablets are being adopted have put many site owners and internet retailers on their heels trying to figure out what the best approach is to ensure a positive experience for these visitors. Unfortunately, the trendy answer is to simply hire a 3rd party to develop an app that is fun and engaging, but the logic behind this approach is flawed. In fact, the willingness for many large brands to quickly disregard the lessons learned from their web presence in favor of an untested app is surprising, especially considering the tablet is full-featured enough to present the full site experience.

The fact of the matter is, customers are supplementing only a portion of their time online with tablets, not fully stepping away from their desktops and laptops. Because of this fact, forcing users into a mobile version of your site or an app on their tablet will present a fragmented experience for the users and complicate your internal efforts in many areas.

The Challenges

Standards

One of the benefits of websites that is taken for granted now-a-days is the way it standardized platform differences and allows for one medium to be shared equally across the bulk of internet-able devices. The app game has done it's best to unravel this concept, it's not that apps are useless, it's more that apps without a purpose other than completing tasks already available on your website are useless. Obviously this is not without exception, but if you are a site owner and are thinking about moving your eCommerce experience to an app, have you considered the development costs that go into apps? Not just an iPhone or iPad app, but in providing apps across all platforms and devices your visitor may be using?

With the recent release of the Amazon Kindle Fire, there is yet ANOTHER app store to compete with iTunes App store and the Android market and various others. This coupled with the nuances of each device (something Android was supposed to address and yet there are thousands of apps that work on a subset of Android enabled devices) as well as the fact that not all apps work on smartphones AND tablets or vice-versa. All the sudden the costs of developing this experience has increased exponentially and unnecessarily when you consider you already have a website that works on all these devices and platforms (if you're doing things right).

Cohesiveness of a branded experience

Chances are you have thought long and hard by this point as to what your brand IS and how it translates to the internet, and you are pushing that experience out through your site right now. You are working hard to ensure that your navigational paths and call to actions are optimized and every day you're finding new and innovative ways to make your site better. You are working on concepts like customer retention, as you have learned over the years that the repeat visitor presents a much higher ROI and holds your goal conversion rate up so you try new concepts to cultivate your new visitors into repeat customers. NOW, 50%+ of these repeat customers you've worked so hard to engage and retain have recently purchased or plan to purchase a tablet in the next 6 months, do you really expect them to learn how to use a new version your site or store all over again?

Marketing Your Site as an App

Competing for your visitors attention in the fast-paced app market presents another challenge due largely to the sheer volume of apps hitting the market every day, with one report indicating 400 - 1300 per day, but also in the lack of acquisition channels and strategies available within app markets. Assuming that you can generate a large volume of app downloads, there is still a battle to be fought to ensure your app doesn't get lost amongst the hundreds of others installed on your customers device. A recent study states that the average iOS user spends 84 minutes per day using their 108 installed apps. This presents a 2 fold problem, the first being trying to avoid the age-old adage of "out of site, out of mind" as well as the fact that that we're looking at an average of about 45 seconds per app. Obviously this is not specifically isolating tablet users, but you can see where this is going.

On Site Promotions

The last area seen as a potentially large hurdle in executing a multi-platform presense built around the same service, particularly in eCommerce, is in your on-site promotions and merchandising efforts. Most companies executing effective strategies in these areas are building campaigns that monetize certain real estate positions on your site with products and services designed to build the average order and create more profitable transactions. The obvious hurdle here is what good will these efforts serve within an app or mobile site where these areas are not thought out and executed to a tablet user?

Basic Tablet UX Guidelines

By applying an additional set of user experience guidelines to your current design process you can eliminate much of the friction that presents itself uniquely to tablet users as they engage your website.

Navigation
Key: Navigation menus and interactive areas should avoid hover and mouseover events.

Many fly-out navigation systems are constructed with the idea in mind that the user will hover over the desired item to interact with that particular menu item. This can obviously present a rather large problem for users as there is no hover event on the tablet. So all the thought and planning your team has put into the perfect navigation system for your site is now not only going unused, but is most likely also causing visitors, potentially customers, to leave your site.

When approaching this from a tablet user perspective, change the expanding events to fire on click, rather than on hover. The (slight) downside to this is that it will negate the use of the anchor generally assigned to these menu elements, but will make the experience much more fluid for your visitor
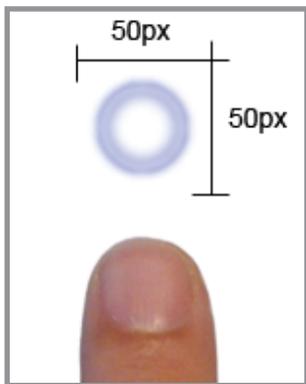

The Interaction Sweet Spot
Key: Create space that invites use and reduces fear of accidental interaction.

As a rule of thumb (or finger), we've defined the minimum ideal interaction as approximately a 50px by 50px area with a minimum of 10px margin. Although this defines a rather good area to press or tap, special attention should be paid to secondary or additional interactions located near the first, especially to the south of it, as our fingers span a vertical space perpendicular to the page.

Multiple Interaction Proximity
Key: Be cognizant of the area directly below your actions.

When stacking actions close to each other, choosing a location that is horizontally located relative to the first action is preferred over a vertical alignment. This is due to the input leaving a vertical fingerprint and thus creating a larger margin of error within vertical presentations. Because the user is interacting with their finger going from north to south, the likelihood that they could trigger an unexpected action is much higher. By presenting the actions in a horizontal alignment, the margin of error is minimized significantly.
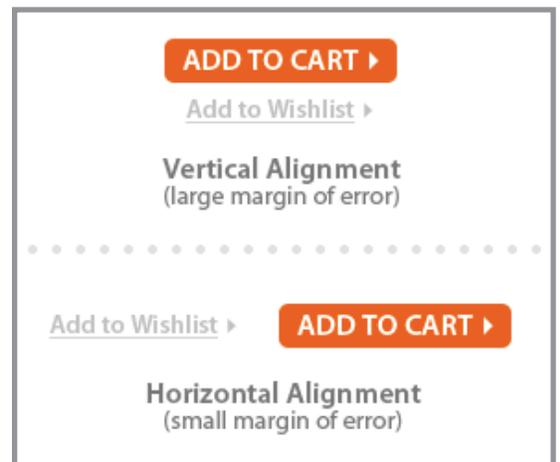
Primary Actions
Key: If possible keep key primary actions within reach of the thumbs.

Some attention should be paid to how tablets are held as this inherently affects how the user can leverage their input device. While most tablets offer an aftermarket stand that can be used to prop up the device and free up the hands, and finger, to interact more freely, the primary use of tablets is in the held position.

Due to this fact the thumbs are the most available input devices to the user and keeping primary actions within the range of motion of the thumb provides an easier target for the user. Make special note that if you're designing a primary action to be within range of a thumb, consider increasing the size of this object to allow for easier use with the larger digit.

New Windows
Key: Avoid new windows & ensure your modal windows can be easily exited.

New windows can be an overwhelmingly frustrating experience in tablet browsers in the same fashion that they are on desktop computers. If your site launches new windows to explain content in more context, for example sizing or special delivery options, this could lead your visitor to abandon their sessions. On a tablet, interacting with these items and then subsequently finding their main window can become very difficult due to size and design aspects on tablets.

Using Modal windows is a popular method to expand content and avoid creating new windows. A modal window is a window that overlays the users main window. The modal window requires users to interact with it before returing to the main content window. When using modal windows special attention should be paid to the size of these instances, but perhaps more importantly to how tablet visitors can close out of them. Simply placing an anchor with a red "X" in the upper right hand corner will not suffice. These windows need a larger sweet spot for the close action and should also allow for the user to click outside of the window to close it.

Form to your Forms

Radio Buttons, Check boxes and Buttons
Bigger is better. Remember our "sweet spot" mentioned above? Keep that in mind when presenting these form items and you'll be in good shape. Small and tightly-fit buttons and and boxes will make it more difficult for the user to select their desired input and very well could scare them away from even trying.

Select Boxes
Avoid using CSS to overlay your select boxes within forms. In this case, old school is better as tablets overlay the drop down options with their own menus that are easier to interact with. The tablet-based menus take the select box and present a larger and more easy to use list of it's options making forms easier to interact with.

Text Inputs
Text inputs work great in conjunction with the tablet keyboard, however, auto population menus can get lost and truncated behind the tablets keyboard making selecting the item you want more difficult. If you do use an auto-populating recommendation menu in conjunction with a text input, be sure to keep it as close to the top of the page as possible and only allow it to use less than 50% of the window height to avoid it running on behind the on-screen keyboard built into tablets.

Quantity Boxes

Text inputs are frequently missed when screen based tablet keyboards launch causing user progression to stop in its tracks. Think of a checkout process when the continue button is hidden behind the keyboard within a tablet screen, and the visitor struggles to highlight and change a 1 to a 2 in their QTY box. Not optimal for an easy experience.

A better approach here may be the ability to "tick" the QTY box up or down in value using buttons to the left and right of the input box (see example image). This presents a user-friendly way to to change their desired QTY up or down without popping up the keyboard, but would still allow them to edit the box using the keyboard if need be.
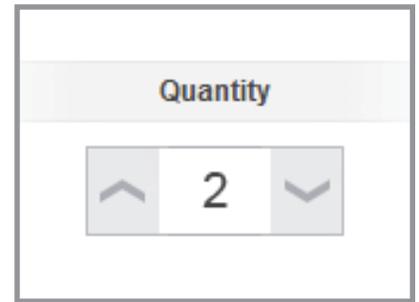
Conclusion

There is obviously much more you can do on a site-by-site basis to ensure a positive experience for your visitors using tablets, but these guidelines will hopefully get your UX teams thinking about this evergrowing segment at the next design meeting. Ensure you and your staff are using your site on the tablet on a daily basis and encourage them to be open with where it's difficult to interact with. More or less, it really boils down to one key difference, the mouse versus the finger and with affordable touchscreens beginning to move into even the desktop market, perhaps the title of the next iteration of this document will be The Rise of The Finger...

About the Author
Nate Ende is responsible for planning and execution of initiatives relating to e-commerce optimization and application development at Trinity Insight. Nate has worked in e-commerce for eight years and has deep experience in leading cross-functional teams in the execution of multivariate testing, user experience and web site development. Nate joined Trinity from BuyOnlineNow.com where he was director of development.

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http://www.tuaw.com/2011/01/28/average-iphone-owner-spends-84-minutes-a-day-using-the-108-apps/
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