The ROI of Mobile Content Strategy

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Originally published: Mar 06, 2013

Which is more expensive: a responsive design web site or creating a separate mobile version? This is a constant debate among many organizations. We can answer it with some simple design accounting.

For the most part, you don't hear anyone saying that responsive web design is the wrong way to go. It's motherhood-and-apple-pie to have a single design that works everywhere. Everyone seems to agree this, in the long run when all the planets align, is the best alternative.

The argument I keep hearing against responsive web design has to do with cost. Creating a site that dynamically adjusts to size, resolution, and bandwidth is an expensive proposition. It often demands a rethinking and retooling of the entire process.

These costs seem overwhelming at first and many folks are arguing that, in the short term, a two-design solution is the wise, more cost effective. Their argument is that you don't have to disrupt the already-working "desktop version." Instead, you create a bespoke "mobile site" with the most likely content and functionality.

The bespoke approach, on the surface, seems less expensive. You don't need to retool everything. Instead, it's a small, self-contained project with clear objectives and minimal impact. It's appeal to the cost sensitive business executive makes perfect sense. That is, if you don't look too hard at the accounting.

Accounting for Bad Design

This debate is not new. Rather a continuation of something UX designers have been talking about for years. The question, in its essence, is about the cost difference between creating a great design and a poor design. For businesses worried about profits (and most are), which one pays off the best?

Great design is expensive. It takes time to learn who the users are and what they need. (Einstein proved that time equals money with his formula "T = $".) It costs to hire better designers and to spend the time iterating through design alternatives, to find the best ones.

Poor design, on the other hand, seems like a cost-effective alternative. Get something out there for folks to react to. Why spend all that time on up-front analysis when the market will give you immediate, direct feedback? It's hard to argue with that logic.

If all you do is measure on short-term costs, poor design is the clear winner. It keeps costs low and brings you to market sooner. There's no doubt about that. (Well, until we start talking about Lean UX. And we will talk about it in just a moment.)

Long-Term Costs of Design

Build cost is only one cost we need to account for. There are four more major, long-term costs we need to factor into our equation.

We could **lose sales** because our design is worse than a competitors. We could see an **increase in support and training costs** because users can't figure out how to use the design on their own.

We could spend time and money on **redesigning functionality** to fix the user experience because our first designs aren't good enough. Or we could waste time and money on building **unused features and content** that we don't have the foresight to realize users will never use.

Whereas the up-front design and development costs are only spent once, these long- term costs are ongoing. At first, something like answering a support question might seem to be far less than doing a ton of user research. However, all those support and training costs add up quickly and if the design isn't improved, we see it quickly overwhelm the development costs. Same with all the other long-term, ongoing costs.

Mobile Content Strategy Reveals Hidden Costs

Stepping back to the responsive web design versus two-version debate. We can use these same short-term versus long-term arguments to look at the true costs. What we discover is that responsive web design looks better quite quickly.

The secret lies in the costs of supporting the editorial efforts of two sites. If you have two versions of your content, you need to spend more money to keep them up to date. Every policy or document needs updating, you have to remember to change it in both places. It's not usual to see sites where the desktop and mobile versions fall out of sync.

Another issue is lost sales/user attention because not everything is available in the mobile version. Curating the mobile version to be less than the desktop version means search results and other links may not appear for mobile users. That creates frustration and frustration can reduce the bottom line.

Redesigning the Editorial Process

No doubt, there's an upfront cost when you try to create a mobile content strategy, especially when you're creating it for the first time.

A content strategy highlights the debt that's been building up in the organization's content. Content audits highlights out of date and unneeded content that requires repairing and pruning. Content modeling shows where the existing editorial process is broken and highlights the new processes and systems the organization needs to support something that works better.

These costs are not cheap. Looking at the work in front of you can be quite daunting.

The Alternative: Piling Up Editorial Debt

It comes down to a pay now or pay later proposition. When a team opts to pay later, by choosing the cheap, quick way of getting things done, they start accruing editorial debt.

Editorial debt is the costs the team will later incur, when they have to spend money and time to keep two sets of content up to date. It's the delayed cost of adding more content into the mobile version when it wasn't designed for that content in the first place. It's what it costs to fix the inevitable broken links and remove the content that's no longer necessary.

Chances are, in most organizations, this debt already exists and is piling up quickly. You can look at how past projects have paid off and the debt that's already accruing. This can predict what likely future debt from new projects might look like.

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It's not hard to get a handle on the up-front, short-term costs of project alternatives. Nor is it difficult to look at the organizational structure to figure out the long-term, ongoing costs. When you do this type of analysis, you can easily determine what the return on the investment of a mobile content strategy might be, whether it's for the long-term responsive design approach or the short-win two-version approach.

By collecting these costs, it's easier to see what's best and why taking a long view could be a better solution for the organization. Design isn't just about proposing solutions. It's about understanding what's best for the organization. Understanding how to put solutions into accounting terms is a win for everyone involved.

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About the Author
Jared M. Spool is the founder of User Interface Engineering. He spends his time working with the research teams at the company and helps clients understand how to solve their design problems.

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