



Designing Engaging Mobile Experiences

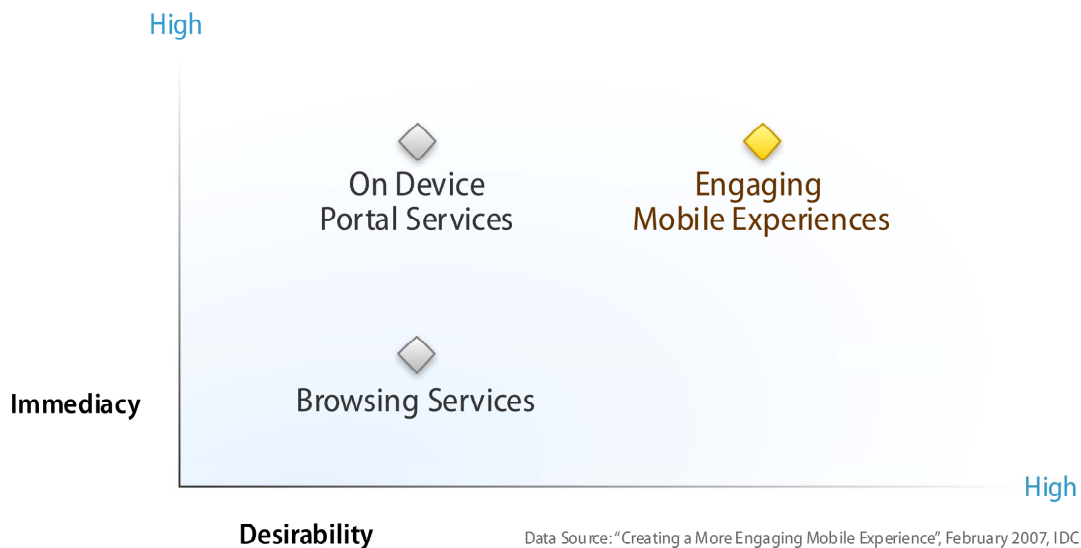
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Introduction

Mobile devices have become a direct extension of our eyes, ears, voice and mind. They have become our constant companions. We rely on them to stay in touch, guide our activities, and entertain us. They have evolved from merely functional tools. Simple voice and data services are no longer sufficient. We have a much greater expectation now. To meet our expectations, a new class of mobile service is emerging called engaging mobile experiences. Engaging mobile experiences put the user experience first. As a result, these experiences prioritize usability, offer new services and deliver content instantaneously. But much more importantly, they build a powerful affinity with the user. They promise experiences that are expressive, memorable, and much more desirable. The design of these engaging mobile experiences requires a special touch as they are developed for the small screen. We believe these guiding principles are critical in defining this new class of experience.



Emerging markets. WAP browsers are slow. On device portals are faster, but the content is the same. Engaging mobile experiences bring the speed and the thrill.

The Mobile Context is Relevant

Today's phones try to be smaller versions of their desktop brethren. Little lists and grids. Little web browsers. Little calendars. They assume users do the same things on their phones that they do at their desks; that the same interfaces are appropriate. They are not. Mobile experiences should not only be smaller, they should be smarter. They must recognize the context and manner of mobile interactions and offer experiences that are appropriate for mobile.



Not your father's desktop. Mobile experiences are all about being a mobile user. We are on the move. We are individuals, yet we want to stay connected. And we're hungry for some stimulation.

User-centric

Today's mobile experiences focus on the technology. Engaging mobile experiences are more valuable because they enable designers to emphasize users over features. Whether a mobile experience is intended for work or entertainment, it must go beyond merely being usable. It should be dependable, consistently solve user's problems, and do so effortlessly. When designed properly, these experiences understand the task, the environment, and the audience. They recognize less is often more and that just because you can, doesn't mean you should.

Fitting

Space is extremely precious on devices. If onscreen affordance doesn't help communicate how users will interact with the content and interface, it is a barrier to them. Mobile experiences are most valuable when they are straightforward and clearly represent their purpose. The presentation as a whole should be glanceable – designed to be read and understood quickly. Superfluous material should be avoided. Icons should be bold and simple. Text should be large, readable and digestible. Items should be spaced distinctly, such that relationships are clear and obvious. Data and information should be lightweight, network friendly and presented in small, relevant bits.

The right tools

Designing and developing great mobile experiences is impossible without specialized tools. In a painfully fragmented landscape it is critical that the development suite brings all the pieces back together. Mobile tools must recognize the creative needs of designers, yet be familiar and empowering to developers. More importantly, they must integrate seamlessly to allow both roles to work together. To address an ever-changing sea of devices, mobile tools must be able to emulate hardware capabilities and provide for accurate testing. They must be flexible, yet offer precise control. Subsequently, they must be powerful and capable of unleashing the best parts of the phone.

Capture and Guide Users

Mobile users are subject to countless distractions and disadvantages. Screens are small, environments are noisy, networks are undependable, hardware is always a barrier and software is often inconsistent. Great mobile experiences overcome these barriers by recognizing them and addressing them directly.



When everything is equal, nothing is important. Use techniques like animation and expanding-focus to draw emphasis to the item of attention.

Establish clear focus, direction and emphasis

Mobile experiences depend on the success of the user being able to find the object of focus quickly and easily despite distractions. User focus should be implemented in a simple, clear and consistent way across interfaces. Actions should be intuitive and natural. Users shouldn't have to think hard about what options are available to them. The hardware can help too. Consider taking advantage of the 5-way and keypad by mapping key presses to actions with spatial and directional significance. The interaction required by the UI should be both visually and reflexively intuitive to the user.

Maintain context

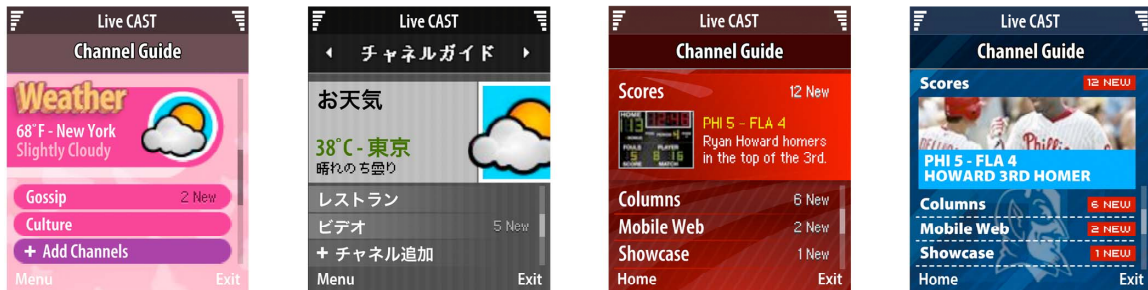
As users navigate mobile experiences it is critical that they are able to recognize where they are and what they can do. Moving from screen to screen can be disorienting if the context changes radically or often. Maintain context by expanding the view of content in place instead of jumping between pages. Use animation to help reinforce physical interactions, display new functionality and content, and ease dramatic changes in context. As much as possible, keep interaction models consistent even when the content switches between very different tasks. While it is inevitable that users will have to learn new interaction patterns, they will be more successful when they are able to leverage their experience and knowledge of previous interactions as they find new ones.

Preview and deliver

Taking the wrong action can ruin an experience. Ideally, users should have a sense of what result an action will have before they commit to it. Previews are a valuable tool for helping them determine what to expect. In the best case, they can even supplant the need to take further action at all. Surfacing information in a contextual manner will help users make effective, efficient decisions. Once a decision is made, it is equally important to support a strong sense of response and offer immediate feedback to the user. Engaging experiences must be fast, responsive and unmistakable.

Differentiation is a Feature

Engaging mobile experiences are ones that stand out from the crowd; they should make us stand out from the crowd. More and more, mobile devices represent identity – from how they look to how they are used. They must be rich, compelling and connect personally to users. They should be exciting, fun and desirable.



Build high visual interest. Mobile phones are often seen as a reflection of personal identity. The visual design should be complementary, pleasing and even fashionable.

Stylize

The idea of engaging mobile experiences challenges the notion that mobile devices are mere tools. Phones have increasingly become a reflection of one's affiliation, purpose and personality – even one's status in society. So for many, style can trump features. To be engaging, mobile experiences must be fashionable. They must make a statement and offer users a broad palette to express themselves in unique, beautiful and arresting ways.

Demonstrate brand

Mobile users are ready and willing to engage with their favorite brands on their phones. Mobile experiences that can faithfully represent brands will be more engaging for users who are hungry for authentic experiences. Though brands have a choice of posting their products with carriers, putting them into distribution, or going it alone, they are choosing engaging mobile experiences. They are choosing experiences that recognize the value of brand integrity rather than having their content repurposed by not so brand conscious means.

Deep customization

One size of mobile experience does not fit all. While personalization is not new, downloadable ringtones and backgrounds are no longer enough. Users are demanding much more than simple aesthetic customization. Services and features must be available on-demand. Engaging experiences must deliver tailored content and subscriptions, enable personalized work flows, and surface essential functionality. However, to be successful they must do all of this without requiring users to invest great effort. Ultimately, they must recognize our individual needs and learn our behaviors; even adapt and grow. Engaging mobile experiences must come alive.

Thrill

It's not enough for mobile experiences to be good; they must be exceptional. Surging competition between services demands that mobile experiences are desirable to be engaging. As consumers, we are hungry for the next great experience – for new experiences that are fun, popular and memorable. Our

phones keep us connected to our community and we are eager to have experiences that we can share with friends and family. Today, mobile experiences only hint at that potential. Engaging mobile experiences will deliver on the promise that they can be truly thrilling.

Fresh and dynamic

The mobile user's attention span is a fragile commodity, easily lost if not stimulated. Network latency is a significant barrier between users and content. Engaging mobile content is consumed rapidly and with great frequency, therefore it must be timely and relevant, immediately available and easily accessible. However, simply making sure content is available is not enough. Mobile content cannot be flat and boring. On the contrary, it must make use of rich media, video, audio, high-fidelity graphics and animation to captivate, excite and entertain.

About the author

Josh Ulm is Principal Designer and Design Lead of Mobile and Devices for Adobe Systems, Inc. Since joining Macromedia in 2004 and continuing with Adobe, he has worked predominately with Mobile and Devices to define the mobile experience platform and works directly with developers and customers to create engaging Flash Lite experiences. His work has driven the successful adoption of many products and technologies for the combined companies and their customers; he is frequently asked to develop and present the company's experience vision; and he is an active and respected veteran within the Flash and mobile developer communities.