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The new wave of mobile web surfing

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By Jason Ankeny

If you're reading this web feature on a mobile device, chances are you're doing so on an iPhone. During his keynote appearance at February's Mobile World Congress event in Barcelona, AT&T Mobility president and CEO Ralph de la Vega called the iPhone "a game-changer," noting that since AT&T exclusively launched the Apple device in mid-2007, 95 percent of iPhone owners now regularly surf the mobile web, even though 30 percent had never done so on their previous handset. "There isn't a device that's easier to use," de la Vega said. "[The iPhone] proves that price resistance is only as strong as the user experience is weak."

Compare the iPhone mobile web statistics to the results of a new report issued by market analysis firm Forrester Research. Among the 5,398 North American consumers queried by Forrester in the fourth quarter of 2007, 48 percent of respondents said they wish they could look up things online when they're on the go, but 58 percent said the mobile web fails to meet their needs--moreover, 60 percent said their mobile device screens are simply too small for activities outside of making calls and sending text messages.

"It's clear the iPhone is driving mobile web adoption--I use the mobile web a lot more now that I have an iPhone than I ever did before," says John Puterbaugh, founder and chief strategist of mobile services platform provider Nellymoser. "It obviously boils down to the iPhone user experience. After all, there have been similar devices in the past, and it certainly is not about the connection speed, either. Apple just comes much closer to a full Internet browser."

And therein rests the key to the future of mobile web browsing as a whole: Consumers are not going to settle for a limited, compromised Internet experience regardless of the device platform. "We've always said there is only one web, and people want full Internet access on their phones," says Jon von Tetzchner, co-founder and CEO of web browser development firm Opera Software. "The problem is that a lot of mobile operators were not pushing it. Even a year ago, operators were still thinking in terms of walled gardens. But now everyone is changing their minds, and it is a real Internet. We're seeing a very big change in what people believe in, and what is possible."

The iPhone is just part of a larger trend, von Tetzchner says. As the limited WAP browsing that once defined the mobile web experience gives way to richer, more comprehensive Internet access buoyed by more intuitive devices and related user interface advances, consumers are exhibiting virtually the same behavioral patterns surfing the Internet on their phones as they do on their desktop PCs. "On the Opera Mini [mobile web browser], we can look at and aggregate what people are doing. The same sites are as popular on handsets as they are on PCs," von Tetzchner says. "That proves that if the service is good enough, you'll do everything on your mobile that you do on a PC."

But even as carriers and consumers slowly come around to the possibilities the mobile web promises, there are still major challenges ahead. "You don't have the room to do everything you want to do on a two-inch mobile phone screen," Puterbaugh says. "On some phones, web browsing is just not feasible. Plus, when you look at the mobile experience, SMS is powerful and voice is powerful--phones have all these other consumer touchpoints that compete with the web. So while some users will have dedicated browsing devices, the web is going to be more of a marginal service to the mainstream subscriber population."

While most observers agree the mobile web will experience its most significant traction in developing economies, where traditional means of Internet access are often unavailable, Von Tetzchner also cites some critical distinctions between the North American and European markets. "The biggest difference between the U.S. and Europe is that in Europe, you don't have to have a separate data plan," he says. "That's a huge barrier to adoption in the U.S. It means you have to decide you want to do something before you even try it."

The evolution of the mobile web experience is far from complete. Puterbaugh points to a number of rival mobile technologies that aim to provide rich, interactive experiences in lieu of the browser, chief among them Qualcomm's uiOne, Adobe's Flash Lite and Flash Cast, Microsoft's Silverlight and Sun's JavaFX Script. "You can't adopt old media terms and simply put them into mobile," he adds. "Browsing is old media--when you take that to a new mass medium like mobile, people have expectations. We need to ditch those expectations and start with a new paradigm."

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