Responsive and mobile-first design for e-commerce stores

You've been learning about **customer engagement**—the interactions and emotional connections between a customer and a brand—and the ways an e-commerce store can engage its customers online. One way to create an engaging experience for your customers is with a website that makes it easy and enjoyable for them to shop, browse, and buy.

In this reading, we'll discuss two different website design approaches: responsive and mobile-first design. You'll learn what both of these design approaches are and the advantages and disadvantages of each. You'll also learn how to determine which is best for your e-commerce store.

What is responsive design?

Responsive design is a web design approach that allows websites to automatically adapt to changes in device display sizes. All images, fonts, and other HTML elements are scaled appropriately, regardless of the user's screen size.

What is mobile-first design?

Mobile-first design is a web design approach that aims to create better experiences for users by designing specifically for mobile devices. A mobile-first website is a stripped-down version of the larger website that is tailored to work on the smaller screen size of most smartphones.

Responsive versus mobile-first design

To choose which design approach is best for your e-commerce store, it's important to understand the differences between responsive and mobile-first design and the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Responsive design pros

- **Ideal for content-heavy websites**. Responsive design is useful for websites that contain a lot of data, such as shopping platforms that offer a wide range of goods. This design approach assumes that your users will mostly visit your site using a full-size display like a desktop or laptop, making it easier for them to do things like fill out long forms or complete complex call-to-actions.
- **Cost-effective development and maintenance**. A responsive design requires one single, flexible layout and involves less time and money at the development and design stages than mobile-first designs.
- **One site for all devices**. Websites with a responsive design adapt to be viewed accurately on every device.
- **One URL for all devices**. All of the data for responsive websites is hosted on one server and there's only one URL. This makes it easy for users to find the site and doesn't require them to download additional applications.
- **Redirects are unnecessary**. Designing for multiple devices requires the use of redirects to send the user to the appropriate version of a webpage. Without the need for redirects, the user can access the content they want as quickly as possible.

Responsive design cons

- **Loss of features**. When you display a website with responsive design on a smaller-screen device like a phone or a tablet, it can lose features, graphic elements, and some functions as it reduces in size.
- **Slow loading**. Since responsive design development goes from large screens to small, high-resolution graphics are used. This makes the site weigh a lot and makes loading slower on mobile devices.

Mobile-first design pros

- **Aligns with current shopping and internet browsing trends.** Statistica projects that by 2025, more than 10% of all retail sales in the United States are expected to be generated via mobile commerce. Additionally, more than half of web traffic worldwide is currently done on mobile phones.
- **Better user experience.** A mobile-first design offers a better overall user experience because a variety of considerations are taken into account, such as an app-like user interface, less text, larger font size, and faster download speed.
- **Improved accessibility.** Mobile-first design improves websites' readability on smaller screens, making them more accessible to people with visual impairments.
- **Streamlined, well-organized content**. Mobile-first design encourages you to include only relevant content in your site. By avoiding unnecessary details, you simplify the customer journey and help customers reach their goal.
- **Fewer bugs**. Mobile-first design requires simpler code than responsive design which can help reduce the number of bugs.

Mobile-first design cons

- **Cost**. You will need to develop different website versions for different operating systems, which may lead to more time and higher costs for development. The design cost is also higher than for a responsive website.
- **Different content**. While mobile-first websites have limited content, responsive versions can be broader and more diverse. Sometimes, this confuses users and can create a negative experience.

Choosing the best design for your e-commerce store

To determine which of these website design approaches is best for your e-commerce business, start by gathering information about your users, creating customer personas, and outlining the purpose of your website. Determine who your audience is, how they access your site, and what actions you want them to perform. Then, follow the 80–20 rule. If 80% of your users are mostly on desktops or laptops, responsive design is likely a better option. If 80% of your audience primarily shops on mobile devices, then a mobile-first design approach might fit best.

Google Analytics can give you information about how people are accessing your site. You can also gather information by researching industry statistics for your market, learning about your audiences' habits through user testing, and surveying your customers.

Key takeaways

Responsive and mobile-first web designs have some key differences, and both have their advantages and disadvantages. By learning more about your audience and defining the purpose of your website, you can determine which design approach is best for your e-commerce business.

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