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MOBILE FIRST WEBSITE DESIGN

Terminology as used in this document

- Design:
  The site's layout, content, features, navigation, screen utilization, permissions, etc. for each user group and/or device. See Theme for colors, branding, etc.

- Graceful degradation:
  PC-first design where designing for a large browser / PC comes first after which variations are made for tablets and smartphones. Generally considered less desirable.

- Progressive enhancement:
  Mobile-first design where design begins with smartphones and works-up to the tablet and finally to the PC / large monitor. This is the recommended approach when possible.

- Responsive Theme
  An approach to web development that allows a website to smoothly adjust it's size across multiple monitor sizes, screen resolutions, and platforms (computer, tablet or mobile device). Recommended for any site needing mobile compatibility.

- Theme:
  The "look and feel" criteria such as branding, colors, etc. for each device.

Design Philosophy
The question often arises whether to design a site for "mobile first" or "pc first"? While the "doing" is a rather technical matter the basic concepts are not overly technical and easily understood by most stake holders of a web design team. Because the discussion is on design philosophy altering perspectives, preferences, and opinions should be considered before beginning.

Mobile First - What it is and isn't
In a nutshell, mobile first simply means starting the website design, or redesign, with the smartphone user in mind. It does not force a mobile presentation on PC users. Nor does it mean having to limit the full website experience for any users.

Just the contrary, with a mobile first approach to website design an improved experience is available to all users regardless of device. The starting point focuses first on the user experience in terms of content, layout, navigation, etc. The question to ask is, "What will be most important to users on each device beginning with smartphones." It is also important to remember the same user may access the site on several devices so the overall experience, features, and content still require a level of continuity between devices.

For this we can introduce another design concept, "Progressive Enhancement". In short, navigation and content priorities should be appropriate for each device and its targeted user group while maintaining the overall user experience.

Graceful Degradation vs. Progressive Enhancement
Graceful degradation vs. progressive enhancement is an old concept that predates mobile but has been adopted by many in the web development community for describing the design approach for both PC and mobile users.

Graceful Degradation
Graceful degradation of a design applies to building a typical PC-first website first. This means designing first for large browsers with complex elements including several menus, sidebars, and various graphical and media elements. Then work on tablets and smartphones once the PC-first website is done.

One common way of facilitating an improved experience from a PC-first site is to employ what are called "Responsive Themes" based on the size of the browser, usually width. Rather than actually alter the content and presentation based on the device type, Responsive Themes look at the width of the browser and move things like menus and sidebars around and adjust some image sizes. This can work quite well in some instances. However, all of the excess and inefficient data handling inherit in the PC-first design and excess server calls are still there and some parts of the interface can be downright clumsy or sluggish on smartphones even with responsive themes. The graceful degradation method may also be less scalable or "open" to future device interfaces as they come along.

This is not to say Responsive Themes can't or shouldn't be used along with Progressive Enhancement. The two actually work very well together. It's the Graceful Degradation that can be problematic.

Progressive Enhancement
Progressive Enhancement designs begin by forcing the site design team to focus (plan) the user experience around the most essential content, features, and navigation first. In other words, the "content and experience priorities". Usually, the initial focus will be on content that changes often and that the site visitor will most often interact with.

Data shows that static content, meaning content that doesn't change or changes infrequently, or is less relevant to day-to-day use is not important to smartphone users and often just "gets in the way". If you feel static content is required it is best to tuck it away under a "More..." menu item or at least keep it off of the smartphone's main menu.

How do Responsive Themes fit in?
Progressive Enhancement benefits from first focusing on the content experience for each supported device while a Responsive Theme allows for an efficient way to dynamically adjust the layout and size of various screen elements based on the size (usually width) of the screen. The two go hand in hand.

So what about the PC / Mac browser users?
From the starting point of the smartphone / small screen you can modify the navigational experience to be optimized for larger screens such as tablets and PC browsers. A big plus is that you take along all of the content, feature, and experience efficiencies that you began with in the mobile design. So, even the PC users will have a significantly improved experience.

What is the negative side to Mobile First / Progressive Enhancement?
- Requires more planning
- Relies on a better understanding of user needs (also a benefit!)
- Is more complicated on the development side

How do we begin?

1. The initial rough plan
Planning is key to any successful project. Our recommendation is to begin with a simple spreadsheet or other document to broadly define the types of content and features that will be available on your site. At this stage consider this an informal document and one that will likely evolve.

Example columns: (of many possibilities, feel free to customize to your needs)

- Content Name: (Agent tools, Manager's Corner, Directory, Marketing, etc.)
- Content type (Page, article, document library, event, feature, pass-through, video, etc.)
- Brief description
- Department / stakeholder (Marketing, Legal, Education, etc.)
- Possible menu category (try to refine choices to one word categories)
- Change / update frequency (hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, seldom)
- Phone Priority (1 - 10, yes/no, etc.)
- Tablet Priority (1 - 10, yes/no, etc.)

2. Preliminary sitemaps
Follow this up with three rough sitemaps or menu flowcharts, one each for phone, tablet, and PC. Example templates are available.

Further reading and viewing

- Luke Wroblewski | Mobile First | live at An Event Apart
  http://www.lukew.com/presos/preso.asp?26
  An excellent non-technical video introduction to mobile first. If nothing else, we highly recommend watching this video. It runs about an hour have some libation handy.

- Mobile First - Why it's great and why it sucks
  http://designshack.net/articles/css/mobilefirst/
  This article is a quick read and does a good job of explaining the differences between graceful degradation and progressive enhancement

- Progressive Enhancement 101: Overview and Best Practices (this is a bit technical)
  http://sixrevisions.com/web-development/progressive-enhancement/

- More still:
  Google:
    - "mobile first"
    - "graceful degradation vs progressive enhancement"
    - "responsive theme"