

The Mobile Phone as a Marketing Platform

insight

Jeremy Lockhorn | April 2008



It's been said that interactive television has been a year away for 20 years. I've written before about how I think that's finally starting to change, driven by consumer demand and advances in a broad variety of set-top box devices. But something occurred to me recently: even the most broadly distributed iTV-enabled set-top box tops out at a few million households. Meanwhile, as of Q4 2007, there are nearly 250 million mobile phone subscribers in the U.S., making the mobile phone arguably the most widely available interactive television platform. And we're only just starting to scratch the surface on how to leverage. This is just one example of the undervalued opportunity presented by the mobile phone as a marketing platform.

Think about it: "American Idol" for years has driven a remarkable volume of fan voting via text message. And earlier this year, news surfaced that ESPN had more visits to the NFL section of its mobile site than it did to the same area of its PC Web site in a single day. Meanwhile, Bravo continues to push greater and greater functionality through the phone surrounding reality programming such as "Project Runway" and "Top Chef". And so on and on.

Many changes in the mobile ecosystem over the last few years -- and especially in the last 12 months -- have laid the groundwork for this simple yet powerful iTV platform. The iPhone, for example, works as advertised -- it brings the Internet to a pocket-sized device. And not just the mobile Web -- the real Web, as the ads proclaim (although one could argue that it's not the real Web until Flash support arrives, but that's another column). It made me an instant Web user on the go, and has changed the way I shop, I travel, buy music, keep in touch with friends, watch TV, and more.

Perhaps, what's even more interesting is the iPhone also met another prediction; it did as many analysts suspected it might. It managed to raise awareness of mobile Web access amongst all key stakeholders: consumers, content providers, carriers, and handset manufacturers alike.

This, combined with growth in flat-rate data services and resulting increased demand from consumers, seems to have finally pushed the content side of the business over the precipice. It seems to have fully (and finally) embraced the mobile Web as a legitimate distribution platform, and that, in turn, has dumped more fuel on the fire. WAP, for long, has been a frustratingly slow experience, but if you ask me, it's ultimately not the bandwidth that has held back growth -- it's the lack of compelling content specifically formatted and adapted for consumption on the handset.

Google figured this out, and developed really strong mobile-specific experiences. As a result, they're seeing a tremendous surge in Web usage from mobile phones. More and more content providers seem to have recognized what we've been saying since the beginning: you can't simply take an experience designed for one channel and cram it into another channel. People

want different things from one device versus another, or at least they expect that content will adapt to fit the unique aspects of whatever screen they're looking at.

And here's the crazy thing about the history of the mobile Web: WAP is actually a powerful platform when used correctly. The culprit behind slow growth in the mobile Internet, until recently, isn't slow bandwidth or a weak infrastructure. Rather, it's been the refusal or inability of those delivering the content to pay full attention to the device's capabilities and to design experiences that can be used efficiently by consumers using tiny screens, no mouse, or QWERTY keyboard.

My colleague, Patrick Moorhead, recently penned a great piece on this for our annual Digital Outlook Report. Full text can be found on Jeff Lanctot's blog.

My takeaway is this: smart marketers must recognize that all emerging media are in the same boat here. Channels lack standards. They don't always support full Web-like functionality. But we can't be so quick to dismiss them. The last year in mobile teaches us that the conventional wisdom might be that platform limitations in general may create minor hurdles, but there's a true opportunity to innovate your way out of the box. It only takes one killer app to turn the tide, and it could be yours.

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About the Author



JEREMY LOCKHORN

DIRECTOR OF EMERGING MEDIA AND VIDEO INNOVATION

Jeremy is an emerging media expert at Avenue A | Razorfish where he is also a key leader of the agency's emerging media practice. The team functions as both a think-tank on next-generation media and an extension of current client teams and is focused on driving innovative marketing solutions for clients. As the marketing landscape continues to fragment and new channels emerge, Jeremy functions as a filter and consultant – helping clients and internal teams to understand, evaluate and roll out strategic pilot programs and analyze the results in an effort to fuel future efforts and broader campaigns. He helps teams take a core idea and extend it to new digital environments, building connections with target audiences in unexpected, yet efficient, ways. This approach goes beyond campaigns; it translates to powerful digital solutions that can transform businesses. While his expertise covers numerous emerging media technologies, his primary focus is on video across all platforms. Jeremy's efforts to research and assess the landscape ultimately feed global strategy development and uncover unique opportunities for innovative campaigns.

Jeremy is a 15-year advertising industry veteran, having spent time at offline and direct marketing agencies before joining Philadelphia-based digital agency startup i-FRONTIER in 1997 as it's first employee. He teamed with founder Brad Aronson to grow the business and

ultimately join forces with Avenue A | Razorfish. During his tenure at the agency, he has served many roles, but they all meet at the intersection of media, creative insights and technology.

He is a frequent speaker on emerging media, having presented at OMMA Video, Digital Hollywood, Streaming Media East and West, CES, Internet Retailer, the AAAA Media Conference and several others. Jeremy also writes a monthly column for online magazine ClickZ (<http://clickz.com/showPage.html?page=3622705>) and regularly publishes whitepapers on a broad range of emerging media topics (<http://www.avenuea-razorfish.com/points>).

Jeremy holds a BSJ in Advertising Management from Ohio University's Scripps School of Journalism, and is currently based at agency headquarters in Seattle, WA.

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Avenue A | Razorfish
821 2nd Avenue, Suite 1800
Seattle, WA 98104
Phone: 206.816.8800
Fax: 206.816.8808

For more information please visit: avenuea-razorfish.com.