



Content: the eyeballs have it

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When you're the company that provided a web platform for Vodafone in the UK you can reasonably be expected to have some insights into what users expect from the mobile internet. For instance, how much difference does using a phone rather than a PC make to those expectations?

Jayanthi Rangarajan, CEO of wireless internet solution provider Novarra, agrees that people will expect and accept differences in how they interact with a phone. However, she feels, other expectations remain the same. Mobile phone users probably expect to use the same popular sites that most fixed users do and certainly want to get to the desired page quickly. "I think speed is a very important expectation," she says. "If it's going to take more than five seconds, we don't think consumers would use it."

Given that Vodafone's offering doesn't assume 3G ownership, you have to offer this type of service to any internet-enabled phone, which means, most of the time, a 2.5G phone. And that, necessarily, is a limiting factor due to the phone's relatively modest processing power and the memory. Take Internet Explorer for example. "For a processor to run that big application slows down a phone tremendously," Rangarajan says.

Novarra's answer is to take the pressure off the phone. "When you add a server to process the website, the experience, even on two and a half G, is quite sufficient," Rangarajan argues. What does that mean in practice? "The bulk of the work we do is compressing the web and processing the websites so the phone itself is not having to process the page," she says. And this has advantages for the network too. "The payload that a website represents is significant," says Rangarajan. "For example a site like CNN is 170 kilobytes in size; what we send over the air is about 35 kilobytes."

However, even within an operator in a one-year window you're talking about at least 100 phones, so formatting is another challenge. "But," says Rangarajan, "it's beyond formatting; it's all the little things." Things like how much memory is on the phone, whether it supports colours in the background, and whether it supports certain fonts. "For example," she says, "two popular sites in Germany are called focus.de and kicker.de - they're huge sites. It's a challenge to make sure that the experience looks good on every phone."

It's a challenge the company is able to take on although Rangarajan feels that there is more that website providers themselves could do to help the process. "Our vision is that the website providers will start recognising the eyeball potential of the mobile user and start to adapt their websites," she says, "and if they adapt their websites we can deliver even better results."

What the company doesn't need to worry about is whether such efficiencies will make its services irrelevant. That's because the use case of the mobile user still needs to be accommodated. "For example," says Rangarajan, "you go to a typical website like Hotmail [on a PC], your eyes and hand move together, you find the login area and you type in your password. On a mobile phone if you just lay down a page as it was designed the login area may be closer to the middle of the page because that's where it was located on the web page. What we do is we bring it to the very top so you can quickly log in."

Such considerations also apply to other common activities like search. To make the mobile use case faster adjustments need to be made, and the need for these adaptations is unlikely to change any time soon. The screen, the phone size, the keyboard, the mouse (or lack of it) the fact that mobile phone users could be walking around with the device while looking at it - all these too need to be considered. There's also the question of inputting - will it be two thumbs like text messaging? That, however, is a consideration that manufacturers can do something about, says Rangarajan. "What we do expect, and hope for, is better input mechanisms: multi-level keyboards for example, because text entry is important; interactivity with the phone with speech; a stylus so you can quickly navigate and point and click. These are the kind of technologies we do think that, once the internet starts to be used, will start to proliferate."

What Novarra clearly hopes is that solutions - and not just its own - make mobile internet usage and penetration, even at 2.5G, much higher in the mobile space. And then? Then there are billions of places the mobile internet could go, as we will find out in next week's issue.