An Internet Watered Down
by John Pettengill

We live in a world of cords and keypads. Every experience, from getting lost to doing laundry, is benefitting from the gadgets that fill our lives. And people have benefited too, as we are more connected now than we ever were before. We can speak to family living in Munich and coworkers in Beijing, all from our desk chairs in New York. We’re so wired that our connectivity isn’t just taken for granted, it’s passé. But while everyone may be wired, none of our things are wired together.

The gaps in our daily experiences can be found all over, in our homes, our offices and stores. Information that can be found online is divorced from the cold, hard reality of the flesh. But a Mobile Web could bridge all of these gaps – giving us the information and tools we need, where we need them most.

The Problem

So why haven’t we exploited the Mobile Web’s potential?

The web isn’t a local tool. From the early days of the BBS to these days of 4chan, the web has worked to bring together people that distance separated. The World Wide Web has become an all-encompassing symbol for connecting people and for letting remote voices get heard. In fact, what we now know as the Internet started as a tool to enable remote lab teams to share research. Once we had accomplished that, it was a backhand thought and a regression to make the World Wide Web a local one. Communities like Craigslist have been drawing cities closer since 1995, effectively replacing classified ads. And sites like Yelp are giving the yellow pages a serious run for their money with in-depth reviews for community businesses. Websites providing local content have drastically improved upon their real world alternatives. Quickly filtering to a custom list of businesses or finding user reviews are two things that were effectively impossible to do using the old standby, the yellow pages.

It’s painfully clear that these websites meet a user need. But that doesn’t make them the Mobile Web. Mobile-optimized versions of these websites aren’t part of the Mobile Web either. While the information they host may be local, the way it’s presented is not. We’re just offering users the same old Internet that features broad content and powerful (but general) functionality. An Internet that just doesn’t work, fit or make sense on a phone.

Phones aren’t computers. Your phone is not the same thing as your home computer. This sounds basic but there are hundreds of mobile websites that prove how we don’t understand this yet. Your home computer has a large display, a full-sized keyboard and a fast connection. As a result, the Internet is sloppy. Its pages are crammed with buttons, panels and tabs. Meanwhile, all those features aren’t stopping us from opening five different windows as we try to do five different things five different ways. Your phone lies on the opposite end of that spectrum, with a small screen, a tiny keyboard and a much slower connection. Everything about our phones reinforces the fact that the mobile Internet cannot be sloppy. The phone is most effective when performing specific tasks, surgically executing them one by one. But if these two devices are so different, why are we giving our users the same Internet? Watering down the Internet by reformatting content to fit onto a small screen isn’t enough anymore. We need to rethink this problem entirely.
Time to make a change. It’s no lie that content works on a cell phone. That’s why applications and mobile sites for sports, news and social networking are so popular. But that’s not the point. We have powerful, location-aware “communication holy grails” with us all day long, and we’re using them to play Sudoku and read the *Times*, effectively wasting ours. We’re filling life’s dead space with the most powerful tool to ever hit the streets. Mobiles have become our book, our radio and our Nintendo. But we’re repeating categories when we could be forging new ones. We need to move mobiles away from the dead spaces and back to real life. Accomplishing this translocation by addressing real world needs in a new way will forever change our daily interactions and ultimately prove the important place mobiles will have in our world. We need to stop formatting content and start providing functionality.

It’s been a long road, and we have finally realized that the mobile space is changing. But most businesses don’t understand what that means yet. They’re still asking us for the same watered down websites. But let’s do them one better. Let’s hyperlink the world with a functional Mobile Web and make their mobiles their mouse.

How Our World Will Change

Things are sloppy here in the real world. It takes three remotes to control your TV, we lose instruction manuals and warranties and we constantly have to learn how to operate new devices. These are challenges that could be quickly solved if every person had a consistent digital experience, a pocket-sized personal computer. Apple can be seen moving in that direction, as they really do have an app for just about anything. But these surgical tools are still isolated from real life, siloed together with the computer. Eventually physical spaces will have special apps that can be pushed to your phone, and you the user may elect to take advantage of that new digital layer. Because mobiles have geo-intelligence, they can tell us where they are. And that clarity of geography informs not just where the user is, but what she is doing. So at last, we finally know something about our users! We have an opportunity and an obligation to give users functionality that takes advantage of that. We can address the unique needs that arise at unique locations. No longer will users have to pile drive through the whole of the Internet or through sites geared towards users from everywhere. No longer will they wait in lines or try and track down sales associates. The Mobile Web will use a series of tailored, location specific apps to change our world.

How we acquire content. Apple and Starbucks have already teamed up, proving to us that a location specific Mobile Web is on its way. When iPhone or iTouch users visit a Starbucks café, they can find in their iTunes app a new button labeled “Starbucks.” Once selected, this button shows users the song currently playing at that Starbucks, along with other recently played songs and Starbucks-promoted playlists. Users can then choose to purchase any song they hear, finally bridging the gap between hearing a song that they like, figuring out the artist and song name, and having the means to purchase that song themselves. Users are given timely information and the tools to act on it.

Apple and Starbucks accomplished this linking without Near Field Communications and without GPS. All they needed was a Wi-Fi router and a willing device. So no more excuses.
The way that mobiles fit into our lives is changing and huge opportunities are there to be seized because of it. As I write this I eagerly await a world where iPhones support Bluetooth connections to accessories. Soon we will have one remote for our life, be it our G1, Pre or Storm. Calling our phones “phones” will be as lacking a description as calling our homes “hovels.”

**How we shop offline.** The website for Barnes and Noble does everything it should. It allows users to search for books, and it also presents new or popular books that users might be interested in. The site, in a word, is useful. But it isn’t useful everywhere. When users are at a Barnes and Noble, that perfectly good website, mobile optimized as it may be, is useless.

The primary tool you’re awarded when you search for a book from your mobile is an “Add to Cart” button. The website is clearly still treating you like you’re stationary, stuck at home. It isn’t showing a map of the store or even featuring store events as a navigational item. You can’t preview music using the in-store Wi-Fi or order a refill for your latte. This exciting layer of
functionality that could be added to the store’s physical space is woefully absent. But empowering users through such a personal channel could inspire loyalty and fill all the gaps that store associates cannot. The brick and mortar building, lacking in personal tools and serendipity, could inform and surprise users in a way that no one has ever seen.

What’s Next?

I’m not saying that your mobile is some kind of magic wand. But, then again, I guess I am. Your mobile is your tool and translator for accessing the hidden world of information that is lurking all around you. It’s a digital magician’s assistant, allowing you to interact with your world on a deeper, much more personal level. The Mobile Web, informed by your location, will give you hyper-specific tools with which you can control and affect your world. Retail stores can offer powerful mobile brand extensions, giving users a playful way of both discovering and getting things done. One of the only existing top-down examples of the Mobile Web was executed at Starbucks. This circumstance reinforces the opportunity and important role that powerful chains have in exposing the Mobile Web. Apple’s App Store also illustrates how important specificity is in application design. Simple single-purpose tools like UrbanSpoon are the crowd favorites.

It has become clear that the world is changing. In mere decades the mobile phone moved from being an extravagant absurdity to a ubiquitous necessity. But the world won’t stop there. Our phones are becoming powerful enough that if we can dream it, we can build it. The Mobile Web is the network that will provide the right tool when you need it. We cannot give our users watered down websites. We have to stop guessing what our users want to do and instead focus on where they are doing it. Location, location, location, as they say in business, is the key.

This article is based on a presentation delivered at the 2009 IA Summit, which can be found at www.slideshare.net/johnep/an-Internet-watered-down-or-how-to-save-the-mobile-web.