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MOBILE-FORWARD DESIGN

Another Look

January 25, 2021

JOURNAL OF BRAND STRATEGY

REPRINT

Foreword by Dr. Donald A. DePalma, Chief Strategy Officer and Founder, CSA Research

Studies have shown that adults averaged about three-and-a-half (3.5) hours per day on their phones – before the pandemic. For information workers, that was close to half the time they spent sitting in front of their workstations and keyboards. For teenagers and millennials, screen time estimates ranged from five to seven-plus (5 - 7+) hours. During the pandemic, anecdotal evidence suggest that those numbers ballooned for everyone. All that time people spend staring at 80 to 90 square centimeters of glass creates expectations about how computing and communications devices should work – quickly, with minimal training, and in their language of choice. Prescient developers internalized these requirements several years ago and switched to handheld devices as the design center of their work.

In 2016, as part of CSA Research’s analysis of the business requirements for global markets, my then colleague Ben Sargent identified the developers’ move to mobile-forward design. Ben now serves as Solutions Architect and Co-Founder at Group-Q. Growth in both developed and especially in populous developing markets put massive numbers of handhelds into hands, pockets, and car

dashboards. The success of this mobile-forward approach wasn’t due to just the expectations set by all that screen time of mobile devices. It was also their usability, multilinguality, constant proximity, the immediacy of dealing with anything that happened on them, and the intimacy of their usage that accelerated the shift to the more responsive mobile-forward design. Developers adopted the smaller, more flexible model so that they could scale their applications to any size and use case in any market and language, a task that was difficult if not impossible with PCs and traditional website.

This article illustrates the vision and benefits of mobile-forward design for any application deployed anywhere – on the web, a phone, a laptop, a tablet, cable box, streaming console, game station, and things that have screens but haven’t been invented yet. It is the long-sought developer’s dream of “write once, deploy many” coding model. It allows companies to offer the same experience everywhere, scaled appropriately and responsively to the user and the device, and **to maximize the volume and speed of content and languages published through a single, unified experience.**

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Mobile-forward design: An emerging trend for global brand websites

Received (in revised form): 8th June, 2017



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Abstract

Innovative brands like WhatsApp, now owned by Facebook, grew up with 'mobile-first' development and responsive web design (RWD). The emerging trend exemplified by digital champions — called mobile-forward design (MFD) — assumes an app-like approach for brand.com customer experiences. It affirms mobile-first development but takes that notion further by eliminating everything else, using RWD. It puts the mobile experience 'forward' as the only experience, available across PC, tablet and mobile platforms. Mobile-forward design delivers one customer experience on all screen widths, with no device-specific interfaces. It also puts that same experience forward for all markets, in all languages. The content and features delivered may vary by market and audience, but the differences are plug-and-play within the design, based on country, language and other personalisation logic. Based on an analysis of the customer experience, rather than on any underlying code, CSA Research has arrived at an initial set of criteria for evaluating whether a website meets the test of mobile-forward design. This paper shares why mobile-forward design should be considered the best practice for global brand websites.

Keywords

mobile-forward design, website design, customer experience, content management, ecommerce

LANGUAGES MAXIMISE REACH FOR GLOBAL BRANDS

Digital experience is critical for sales and customer retention, but it takes a minimum of 14 languages for any brand to market to 90 per cent of the world's online opportunity.^{1,2} Those same languages bring only 74 per cent of the world's online population. Common Sense Advisory (CSA Research) calculates opportunity based on the economic contribution of online populations, using per capita GDP based

on their country, giving a more realistic measure of digital opportunity than audience size.

Of the 2,657 prominent websites our analysts visited in 2016 — a list drawn from the Forbes Global 2000, the Alexa Top 500 Global Sites, and Interbrand's 100 Best Global Brands — a vanguard of 336 global brands already manage their web presence in at least 14 languages. Another group of 150 brands offer 25 or more languages, of which 100 provide

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30-plus and 18 surpass 40 languages.³ Each new language increases the addressable online audience — and available spending power.

In this study, incorporating earlier discoveries, CSA Research confirmed stages in the growth of language support online, where clusters of companies stop due to diminishing return on investment (ROI). Our analysts now refer to these resistance points as ‘ROI walls’, because they signal that brands do not find sufficient return on investment in languages to move beyond them. The data reveal that the first such wall occurs at approximately 11 languages, or at 85 per cent of the digital opportunity. Only 404 of the websites studied passed that mark, meaning that 85 per cent of the brands stopped short of 85 per cent of the market. Global brands in competitive product categories cannot afford to leave 15 per cent of the digital opportunity unaddressed.

Researchers found 935 monolingual brands, just over 35 per cent of the total sample. Of the 1,722 multilingual brands, 1,318 sites (77 per cent) were still stuck behind ROI Wall 1. Of the 404 sites that went further, ROI Wall 2 squeezed out 304 brands (73 per cent) before they reached 30 languages. Among the remaining 100 sites, 82 were caught behind ROI Wall 3 at 40 languages, leaving only 18 digital champions breaking through to 41 or more languages for their brand.com experience (see Figure 1).

For more than a decade, CSA Research has documented best practices in global websites. In 2016, the research team went further, scrutinising how the sites with 41 or more languages were designed and organised, in contrast to those stuck behind the third ROI wall with only 30–40 languages. The analysts discerned a dramatic shift in how these digital champions design their global web experience.

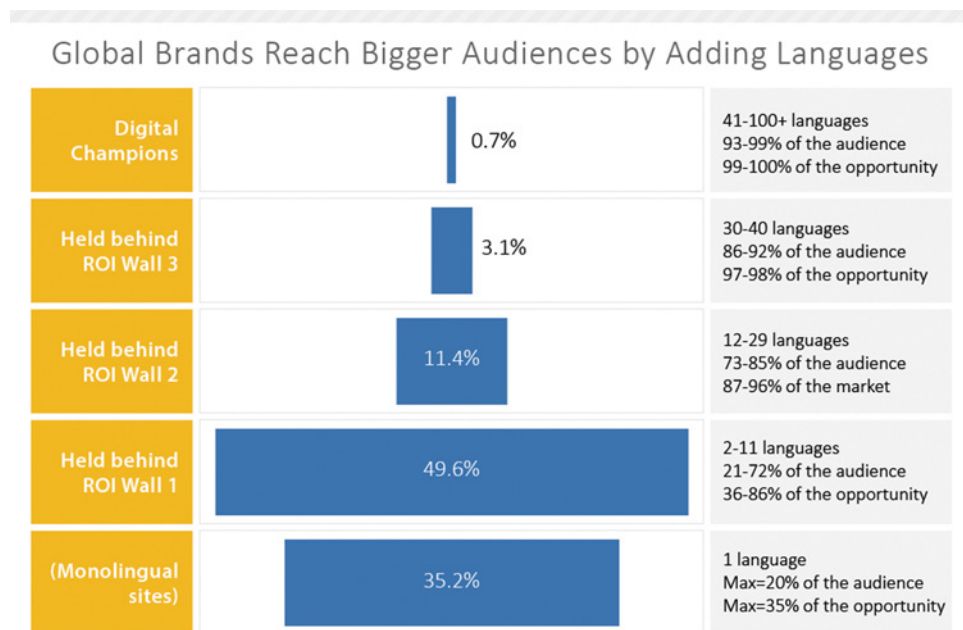


Figure 1 Digital champions deliver a global customer experience (CX) in over 40 languages
Source: Common Sense Advisory, Inc., ‘Global Website Assessment Index 2016’.

SITE DESIGNERS DRAW ON THREE METAPHORS FOR WEB EXPERIENCE

Starting at the broadest level, CSA Research analysed the design paradigms used by leading global brands. Among the 100 websites with 30 or more languages, researchers found three distinct types of user experience:

1. **Corporate information sites that were designed to look and feel like real-world paper, such as gsk.com.**

These brands present details about the company, products and services by organising pages in a logical information tree or tagging them for filtering, sorting and searching. The products offered in each country, however, may be different or depend on different distribution channels or subsidiaries. Rather than publishing consistent information in every language, these companies go through a process to decide what is relevant in each country. Navigation elements and inline links help visitors find information about a country, but that content is generally available in only a limited number of languages pertaining to a specific market.

2. **Online services sites that were designed as software programs, such as bing.com.**

These sites look like applications, using elements typical of a graphical user interface (GUI). Brand.com websites as apps look, feel and behave more like software. Not surprisingly, among the 100 companies supporting 30 or more languages, all the brands taking this approach were software companies and software-delivered online services. They treat their online customer experience as a user interface, with features already familiar from productivity and gaming products.

3. **E-catalogues that exhibited both traits, such as mercedes-benz.com.**

With or without e-commerce, manufacturers and e-tail companies organise catalogues of products or services. While the text and visual presentation mimic a printed catalogue, the online version allows users to create accounts and store information, such as preferences, wish lists and shopping carts. Thus, e-catalogues look like paper but function like apps.

Although the 'paper' look prevailed for 72 per cent of websites with 30 or more languages in our data set, 11 of the 12 websites with 45 or more languages adopted a GUI-like design. These 'brand.com as app' websites supported an average of 55 languages (see Figure 2).

Without a doubt, many factors play into this equation, including digital product delivery versus hard goods distribution. CSA Research's analysis also identified factors in customer experience (CX), cost management and content velocity, all of which may be pushing innovators to adopt an app-like approach for global websites.

HOW GUI-LIKE DESIGN IMPROVES THE GLOBAL CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

In 2010, CSA Research found only three sites using design principles and site logic based on a GUI-style experience. One of these, YouTube, gave separate user controls for the country and language variables, allowing visitors to display the interface in their preferred language, such as Spanish or Japanese, even while viewing content from any country, such as Germany or Korea. While paper and e-commerce sites invariably tie language and country together — as a fixed locale — app-like websites more easily

Websites Designed as Applications Support More Languages

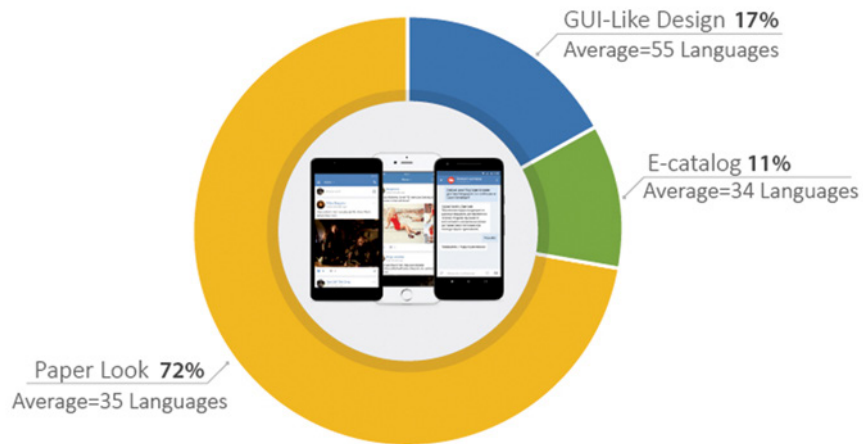


Figure 2 On average, top sites with a GUI-Like CX reach audiences in more languages
 Source: Common Sense Advisory, Inc., 'Global Website Assessment Index 2016'.

separate these parameters, allowing visitors to customise their own experience. Offering flexible, user-selectable locales is a best practice for global CX, enabling a range of common use cases not supported by the fixed locales of most paper and e-catalogue sites.

'Paper' designs still rely on the original conception of the World Wide Web as a collection of hyperlinked documents. These sites store pages as discrete files or as database content managed in a content management system (CMS), but in either case present content to the user as an information tree for browsing or as discrete documents found via search. Links and menus help visitors find their way to country- or language-specific information trees or repositories; for example, *gsk.com* still evokes a paper-like experience — not a GUI (see Figure 3).

The information architecture behind a 'paper' site typically assumes a one-to-one correspondence between country and language. This way of thinking results not only from the old paradigm of the web,

but also from the traditional distribution methods for hard goods. For the same reason, e-catalogue sites often fix their locales. The product database is slightly or entirely different in each market and the content is only available in relevant languages. These sites present extra challenges for visitors speaking a different language or located in a different country.

The current country and language preferences of any given user, for any given experience, cannot be assumed in the digital world. People travel, study, work and live abroad — or their friends and families do. People live and work in multilingual environments and regularly switch languages depending on activities, time of day or location. When brands limit information relevant to a specific country to a single language, customers or prospects get left out of the conversation.

While page-style information sites struggle to separate country from language, GUI-style web applications easily sort them out. Flexible locales, managed for app-like web experiences, can switch

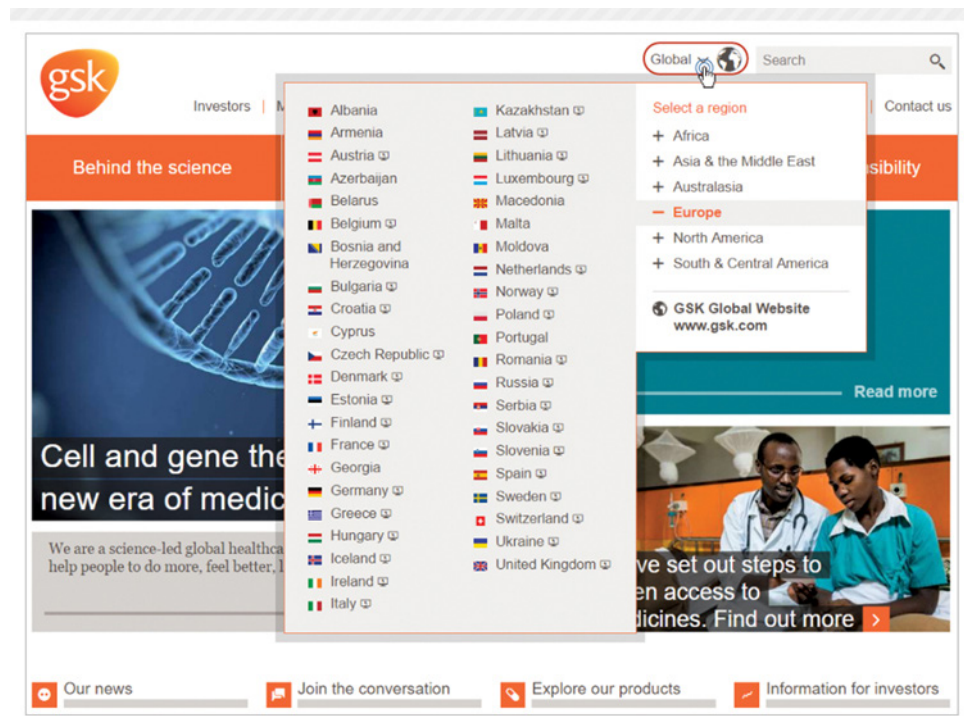


Figure 3 GSK's links and menus take visitors to country- or language-specific pages
 Source: Common Sense Advisory, Inc. and GSK, 'Expanding Global Customer Experience' (2016).

the interface language from English to Japanese without changing the country parameter. Likewise, changing the country setting does not have to change the language of the experience. The most effective global CX includes widgets allowing anonymous users to select content configuration options (see Figure 4).

Examples of a GUI-like CX among the digital champions include Google (140 languages), Facebook (84), VK (75), YouTube (69), AccuWeather (53), WhatsApp (46) and Ask.fm (45). This list includes the (now traditional) web app brands as well as newcomers to our lists — the mobile app brands. Just as web app companies like Google and Facebook were driving innovation 10 years ago, now mobile app companies are taking the leadership position in global CX.

WHERE THE INNOVATORS ARE GOING: MOBILE-FORWARD DESIGN

Innovative brands like WhatsApp, now owned by Facebook, grew up with 'mobile-first' development and responsive web design (RWD). The emerging trend exemplified by digital champions in 2016 — called mobile-forward design (MFD) — assumes an app-like approach for brand.com customer experiences. It affirms mobile-first development but takes that notion further by eliminating everything else, using RWD. It puts the mobile experience 'forward' as the only experience, available across PC, tablet and mobile platforms.⁴

Mobile-forward design delivers one customer experience on all screen widths, with no device-specific interfaces. It also puts that same experience forward for all markets, in all languages. The content

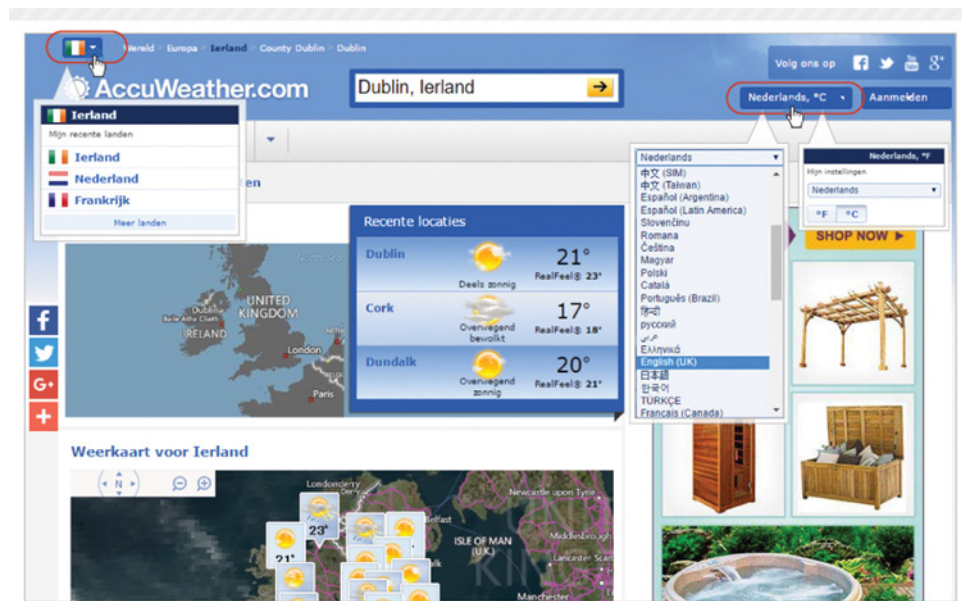


Figure 4 AccuWeather's configuration settings control what content surfaces in the CX
 Source: Common Sense Advisory, Inc. and AccuWeather, 'Expanding Global Customer Experience' (2016).

and features delivered may vary by market and audience, but the differences are plug-and-play within the design, based on country, language and other personalisation logic. MFD builds on existing approaches by:

- **Utilising adaptive web design principles.** Mobile-forward websites rely on responsive web design, which allows a single design to dynamically re-size according to the window or screen size. RWD re-draws the screen when users change the window size of the browser, using cascading style sheets (CSS). Because CSS allows elements to be shown, hidden, moved, reflowed and re-designed, RWD can result in a variety of experiences, depending on the display size. Sixty-two per cent of the most globalised websites — those with 25 or more languages in 2016 — use RWD in all markets; 87 per cent offer a responsive interface in at least one country or region, while 13 per cent
- still offer no support for small screens. MFD websites are responsive, but they go further by enforcing a consistent CX across all platforms and screen widths.
- **Extending mobile-first best practices for global websites.** Because the smallest screen imposes the greatest challenge for designers, it should be tackled first. In a mobile-first scenario, layouts for tablets, laptops and large-screen monitors build off the small-screen look and feel. These later iterations, however, often end up as distinct layouts that must be managed separately and may preserve device-specific functions. Branching and maintaining separate code bases for .com experiences adds cost, delay and complexity for site development and content creation. Providing the same experience on all devices allows a brand to introduce new features and launch new content faster.
- **Delivering one CX for all devices in all markets.** Taking mobile-first development and responsive web

design to their logical conclusion, brands adopting this new practice do not waste resources on developing inconsistent experiences across their various regions and channels. The principles of mobile-forward design are especially relevant to a global brand because they help streamline support for international markets. MFD is device- and platform-agnostic. To date, the approach has predominantly been applied to sites built around web-based or mobile apps, but corporate information and e-catalogue sites can also benefit. CSA Research now considers mobile-forward design a best practice for any brand.com website.

PRINCIPLES OF MOBILE-FORWARD DESIGN, IN PRACTICE

Based on an analysis of the customer experience, rather than on any underlying code, CSA Research arrived at an initial set of criteria for evaluating whether a website meets the test of mobile-forward design:⁵

1. **User controls for content and interface.** The first criterion demands that a site function as a web-based app, offering user-controlled settings in the interface based on GUI-style architecture and design. Onscreen widgets are common for these sites, allowing anonymous or not-logged-in visitors to set preferences. These choices may change the language of the interface, the country of interest or other options, such as currency (see Figure 5). For sites with log-ins, additional preferences may appear on an account settings screen. **User and brand benefit:** Users want and expect to tailor their own experience. Companies maximise the value of their digital assets when users visit more often and stay longer. By allowing users to customise their experience but see the same content regardless of channel, MFD improves customer experience, increases engagement and raises the value of digital content.
2. **Same experience on all devices.** Users encounter the same features, content and design on all devices. Even for

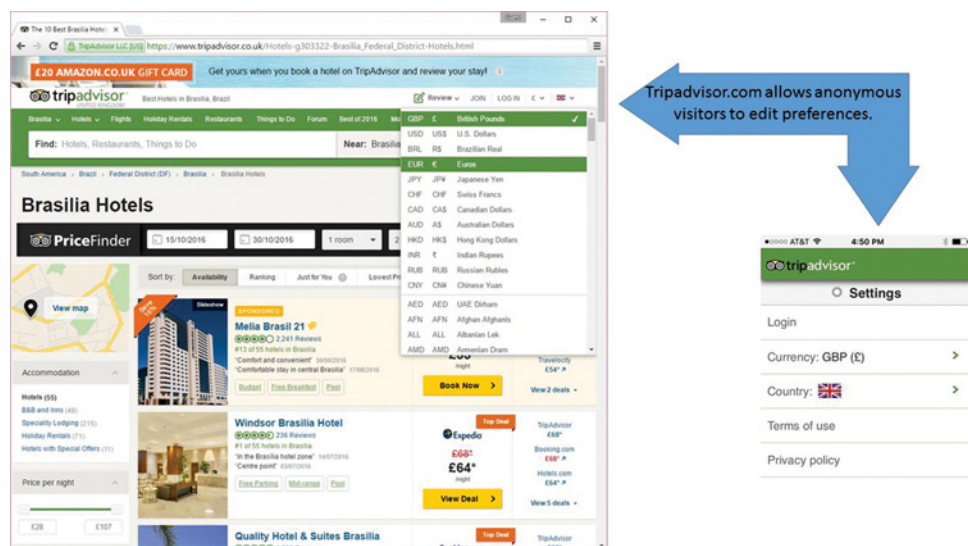


Figure 5 TripAdvisor's settings give full control to anonymous visitors

Source: Common Sense Advisory, Inc. and TripAdvisor, 'Mobile-Forward Design for Global Websites' (2016).

non-contiguous visits, brands should not expect their users to learn several versions of features or navigate from a different look and feel (see Figure 6). RWD is the easiest way to accomplish platform- and device-agnostic CX, but consistency is the test.

User benefit: Visitors want to swap screens and devices without changing how they interact with a site. MFD boosts success as customers perform tasks on multiple devices.

3. Same experience in all markets.

This criterion is not obvious, because a single-language or in-market app might still meet the first two criteria here. This test determines whether changing language, country or other settings results in a redirection along the customer journey — or simply refreshes the user's current position. If changing preferences results in navigation to a different page — thereby moving the visitor to a different moment in the

journey — this does not qualify as MFD (see Figure 7). The screen may reload and the URL may change, but continuity in the customer experience is the test: The user remains on the current screen, in the same moment, but now with different parameters applied.

Brand benefit: Global brands depend on scale and velocity. One app for all markets allows companies to scale across more markets, accelerate product development roadmaps and increase content velocity.

MOBILE-FORWARD DESIGN CASE STUDY

Adobe provides one example of MFD. While the default page looks like a typical homepage, with blocks of text and images on a white background, clicking the menu icon loads an app-like interface that fully meets MFD criteria (see Figure 8):

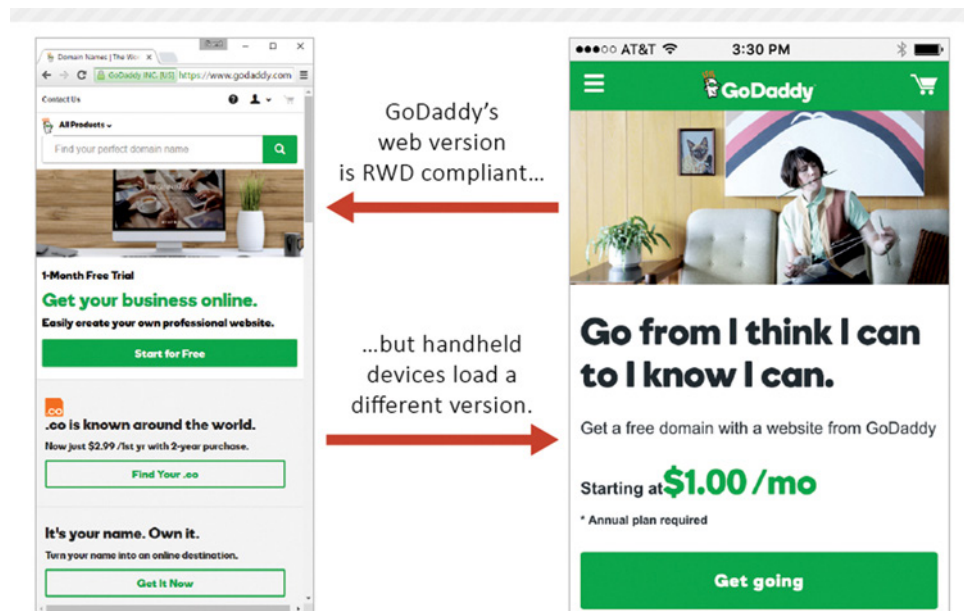


Figure 6 GoDaddy's device-specific experiences force visitors to re-learn interface

Source: Common Sense Advisory, Inc. and GoDaddy, 'Expanding Global Customer Experience' (2016).

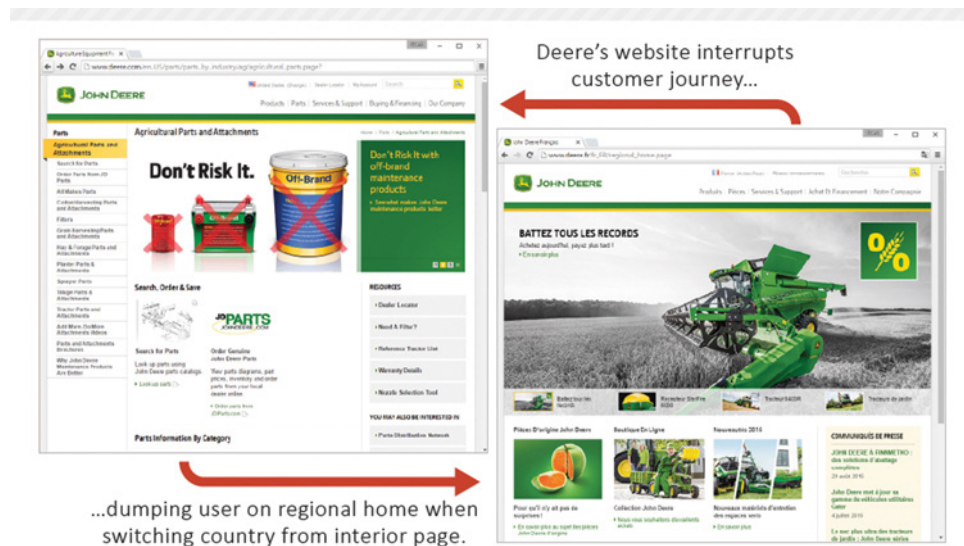


Figure 7 Deere's paper-style site interrupts journey when visitor switches country
 Source: Common Sense Advisory, Inc. and Deere, 'Mobile-Forward Design for Global Websites' (2016).

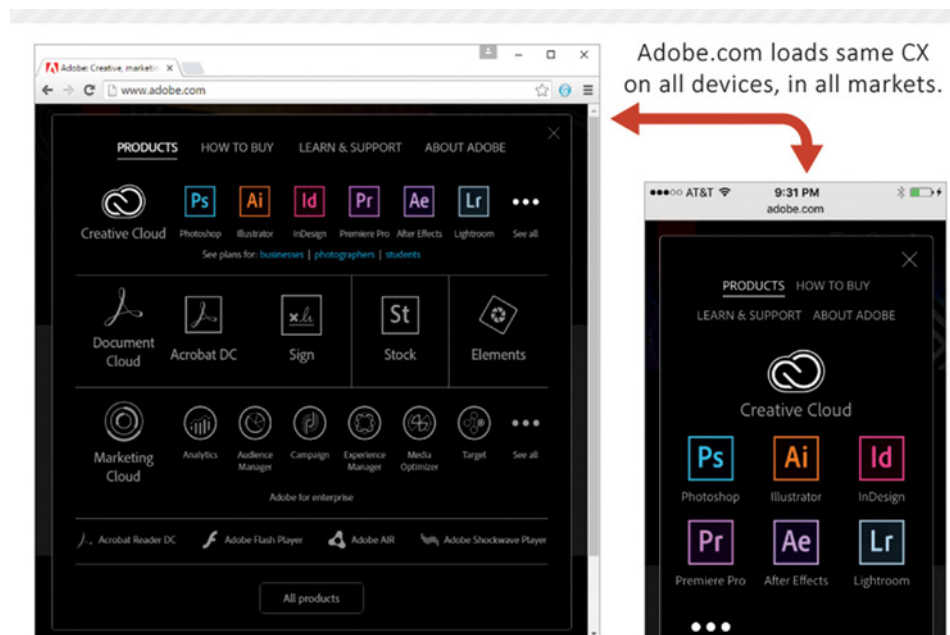


Figure 8 Adobe's common web interface loads regardless of device or market
 Source: Common Sense Advisory, Inc. and Adobe Systems, Inc., 'Mobile-Forward Design for Global Websites' (2016).

1. **Users control content and interface.** Adobe offers two separate user controls that qualify. First, text links following 'See plans for' filter the

content into a common template, whether the visitor clicks on Businesses, Photographers and text change, and some functions are

omitted, but the screen template is the same. Second, Adobe provides a widget for changing a region and language. Here, Adobe deviates from best practice by locking language and country parameters into fixed locales.

2. **The same experience loads on all devices.** Downsizing a window on a PC, this CX looks and feels just like the version that loads to a browser on a smartphone or tablet. Users benefit from a consistent experience even when device hopping.
3. **The same experience loads for all markets.** After selecting a region in the widget, the current screen reloads, whether or not the user is logged in. The screen contains the same or equivalent 'page' content, now for the new region/language combination. The site hides features and content not pertinent to the new market.

WHY MOBILE-FORWARD WILL PREVAIL FOR 'BRAND.COM AS APP'

Once mobile has become the first design developers work on, the next question is 'Why do anything else?' Mobile-forward design eliminates the need to develop, launch and maintain separate versions. Clearly, this will not work for all brands right away, but it is crucial for efficient and scalable globalisation. Brands adopting this approach reduce their cost and effort — and accelerate the velocity of feature development and content launches — by limiting device-specific versions. The benefits are hard to miss:

1. **Users appreciate the consistency, simplicity and familiarity of one design.** They are already screen hopping, so why confuse them by switching

the design just because they picked up a different device?

2. **Mobile-forward design unburdens the site owner.** The benefits to site owners include streamlined internationalisation, development, localisation and testing routines. For the young hyper-global companies that surpass 40 languages, this capability proves decisive — in fact, it already matters if you are still trying to break through ROI Wall 1.⁶
3. **MFD increases agility.** In the future as in the past, CX design must adjust to ongoing changes in digital infrastructure and consumer pathways. From smartphone adoption to Google algorithm changes, brand managers and marketing practitioners regularly respond to changes in the practices required for effective participation in the digital economy. Businesses must adapt immediately or suffer consequences in the marketplace — as many discovered in 2015 when Google demoted non-mobile-friendly sites in its search results. MFD protects essential business operations by reducing code branches and enabling code and content teams to focus all available resources on one CX.
4. **Streamlined development helps position companies for screenless interfaces.** New frontiers are opening up in voice-controlled applications and the Internet of Things (IoT). The emerging intersection of IoT, gaming consoles, wearables and voice interfaces will force brands off-road into a screenless world.⁷ It is time for global brands to batten down the hatches on graphical user interfaces and web CX. Global companies must reduce complexity now around visual content by

upping their brand.com experience as a universal, multilingual app running on all devices.

CONCLUSION: HOW TO COMPETE AT THE NEXT LEVEL

Focusing on one CX designed to function in any language on any device is already the chosen path for many digital brands. Mobile-forward design helps enterprises achieve a competitive advantage by improving CX, enhancing the value of digital assets and accelerating the global launch of features and content. MFD should be considered the best practice for global brand websites. It is time to drop device-specific interfaces, build a universal web CX and smash through those ROI walls.⁸

Notes

- (1) CSA Research (2016) 'Mobile-forward design for global websites', available at <http://www.common senseadvisory.com/AbstractView/tabid/74/ArticleID/37187/Title/Mobile-ForwardDesignforGlobalWebsites/Default.aspx> (accessed 1st May, 2017).
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