

The Best & Worst of the Mobile Web

The highs and lows, from your handset

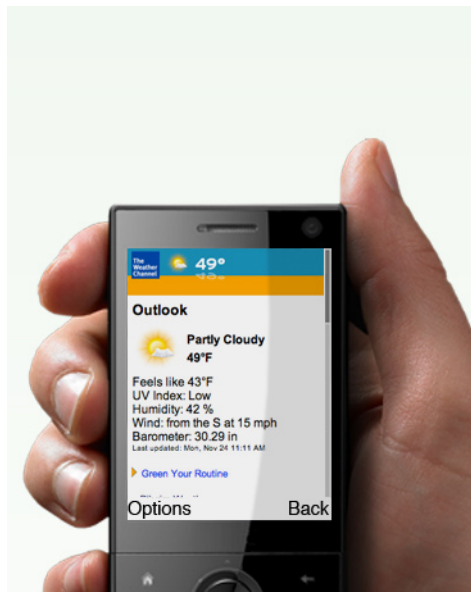
The mobile web is reaching critical mass.

After years of anticipation, all the pieces are finally falling into place. The devices, networks, users and brands are all on the same page...and it's about 128 x 160 pixels (and growing).

As this “Best & Worst” survey shows, 2008 is the “late early stage” of the mobile web: the end of the beginning. There's a huge disparity between best practice and common practice, with most mobile websites still clustering around the bottom of the effectiveness scale.

But from this cluster, a few brands are leaping out; they're getting it right and reaping the rewards. They're creating simple, compelling mobile web experiences that entertain, satisfy a real need or do both.

To take a snapshot of the mobile web today, we asked a panel of distinguished mobile-marketing experts to tell us their favorite mobile sites and the ones they found disappointing or needing improvement. This eBook is the result.



Naming, not shaming

This eBook is organized around the list of principles that emerged from our dialogue with participants. The idea is simple: we want to make the mobile web better (which is also our motive behind **mobiThinking.com**, the resource for mobile marketers, and **mobiForge.com**, for mobile web developers).

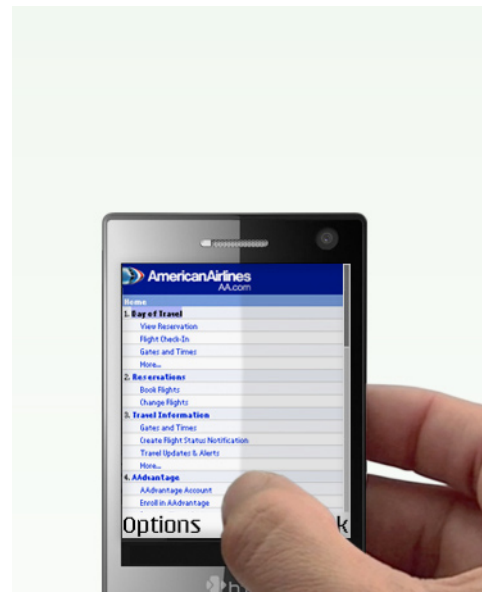
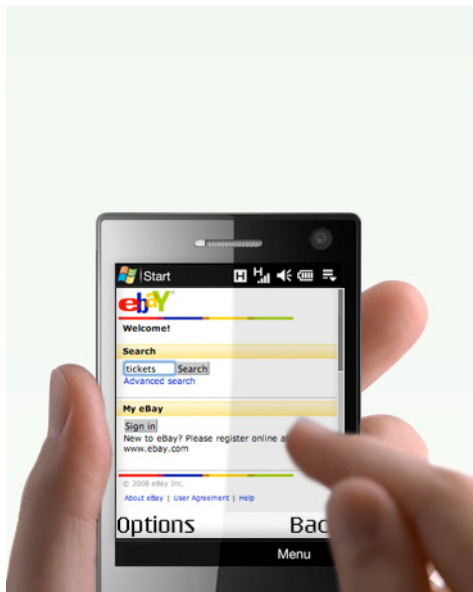
This exercise is really about the great sites and the lessons we can learn from them. But there's as much instruction in failure (or near misses) as in success. So we'll also share a few mobile websites that our experts feel fall short of their full potential.

The sites listed here as negative examples aren't really the "worst" at all – they just demonstrate what happens when one of the lessons is not followed.

We'd love to hear your response to this eBook, so we hope you'll visit the **mobiThinking blog** and weigh in with your own nominations or your thoughts on the ones discussed here.

Onward and upward!

The mobiThinking team



The Panelists

Thanks, everybody!

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You need to have one

Mobile is not a niche – but it’s still seen as a niche play by too many brands. With anywhere from 3.5 to 4 billion mobile phone users, you’re missing a prime opportunity if you’re not using the mobile web to strengthen relationships with your present and prospective customers when they’re on the move.

Some services spring to mind immediately – Sports, News, Finance, Weather, Travel, Shopping, Social Networking – but any vertical that people are passionate about deserves a mobile site.

Winner

BBC
BBC.mobi

The BBC has invested a lot in getting mobile right. It’s a clean, crisp site with plenty of easy-to-find content.

It was a popular choice with the panelists, who loved the way the BBC auto-detects a mobile device from the main BBC website, and serves up made-for-mobile content.

“It’s not the prettiest or the fastest, but if you want good news, fast, it’s hard to beat.”

Sinner

The Trainline
<http://Trainline.com>

Train timetables and ticketing are obvious services to supply to people on the move – and they’re likely to need the information in a hurry. So the UK’s trainline.com mobile web experience leaves a lot to be desired.

“They don’t recognize the fact that it’s a mobile device trying to access the site, so all you get is the normal website. I try to use it for about a minute, end up frustrated and leave. A bad user experience.”



BBC.mobi home page

Make sure it actually works

Our experts are amazed by how many mobile websites simply don't work – they have no time for sites that render poorly, load slowly or crash on certain handsets.

“Any site that doesn't have handset detection, dynamic content formatting and URL redirects is missing out on giving the best user experience.”

Winner

ESPN
ESPN.mobi

ESPN.mobi is a regular in lists of top-ten most-visited sites, on occasion earning more visits than the .com site. It does one thing and does it exceedingly well: serves sports fans with timely updates and instant access to information about their favorite teams and sports.

“ESPN chose to focus on location- and time-sensitive information, then optimized the design around the mobile. Overall, the ESPN site feels like it's a series of varying page states as opposed to a huge sequence of pages... it helps avoid the 'pogo-sticking' effect that often leaves users feeling lost.”



ESPN.mobi home page

Make sure it actually works

(continued)

Sinners

YouTube

<http://m.YouTube.com>

When it comes to mobile entertainment, YouTube has the perfect niche, but the experts felt there's plenty of room for improvement. Most importantly: the site just doesn't work on enough phones.

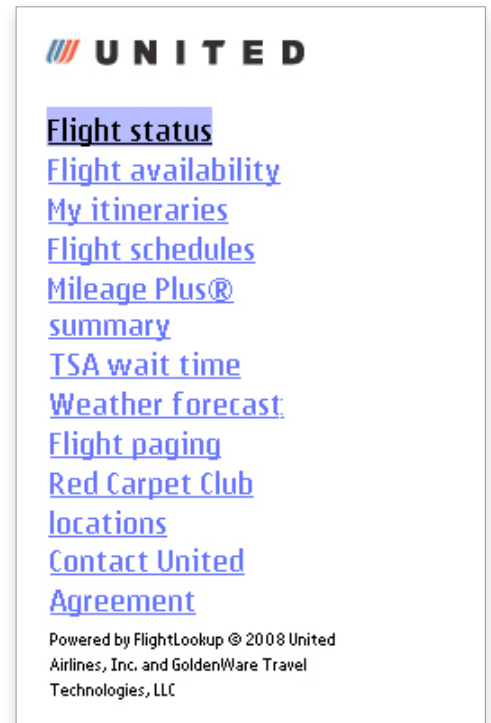
"They seem to have taken a one-size-fits-all approach instead of using device targeting."

United Airlines

<http://UA.flightlookup.com>

United's mobile site also failed to cut the mustard, suggesting the airline needs to concentrate its efforts on user experience.

"...browser crashes, poor information display and limited functionality."



UA.flightlookup.com home page

Solve a real problem

Utility is the engine of the mobile web. Solve a real problem for a consumer on the move and you're on to a winner. If the site isn't providing real utility (this includes providing entertainment – killing time is a need, too), then you need to rethink your mobile proposition.

“Marketers need to put their customers front and center, consider what value they want to deliver and how mobile plays a role.”

Winners

Northwest Airlines NWA.mobi

The airline business has been fast to recognize how important the mobile web is as a tool for delivering useful services to travelers. Interestingly, Northwest Airlines' mobi site draws both praise and criticism. Northwest Airlines is applauded for the excellent job it does by focusing on utility, with simple tools for mobile check-in, flight and gate status and managing reservations. But at the same time it draws criticism for being a boring, graphics-free zone.

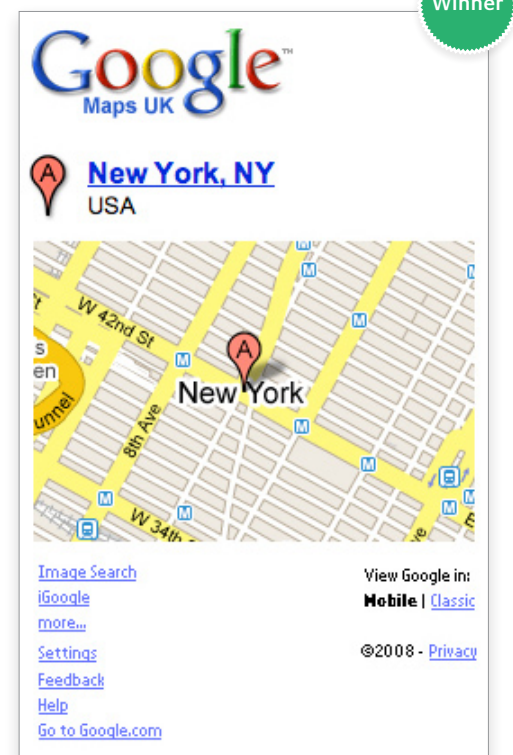
“It offers good organization and prioritization of the features, it remembers who I am and lets me conduct business in the same way as the Internet site. NWA recognizes that its mobile users are Internet users, too, so it keeps the experiences consistent.”

Google Maps Google.mobi

“Great use of technology with well executed graphics. The use of triangulation to provide users with their location provides huge added value.”



NWA.mobi home page



Google.mobi map page

Solve a real problem

(continued)

Sinners

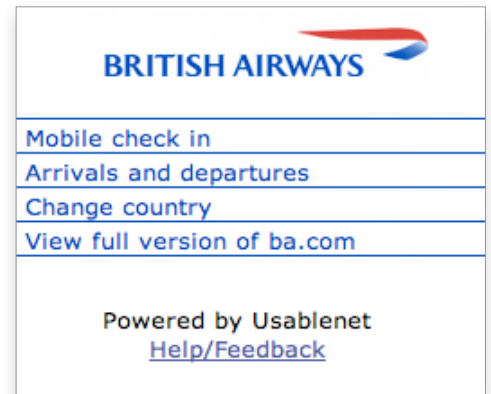
British Airways
<http://BA2go.com>

While the BA mobile site serves its core purpose well. The experts are quick to point out where BA lacks functionality compared with other airlines.

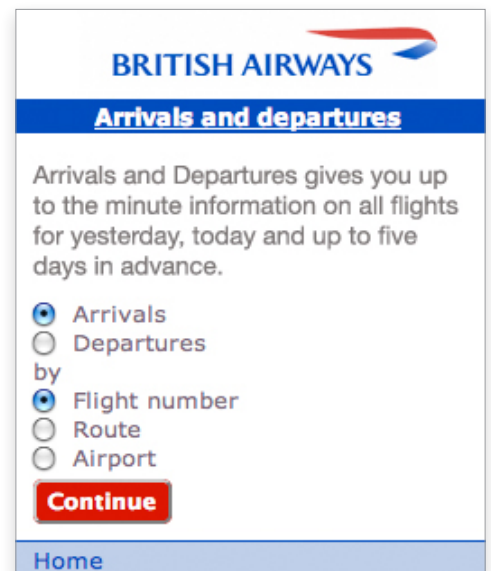
“The mobile functionality on BA is limited compared to many airline sites.”

Some hot tips that would put BA – or any other travel site – ahead of the pack:

“Further consumer added-value could easily be gained through partnerships with weather channels, currency converter sites, etc. All functions that would add value to the consumer.”



BA2go.com home page



BA2go.com
arrival and departures page

Maintain laser focus

Great mobile sites focus mercilessly on their reason for being, removing all extraneous content, decoration and frippery.

“Listen to Edward Tufte’s advice and hide the ‘computer administrative debris’.”

Winners

Fidelity Investments [Fidelity.mobi](#)

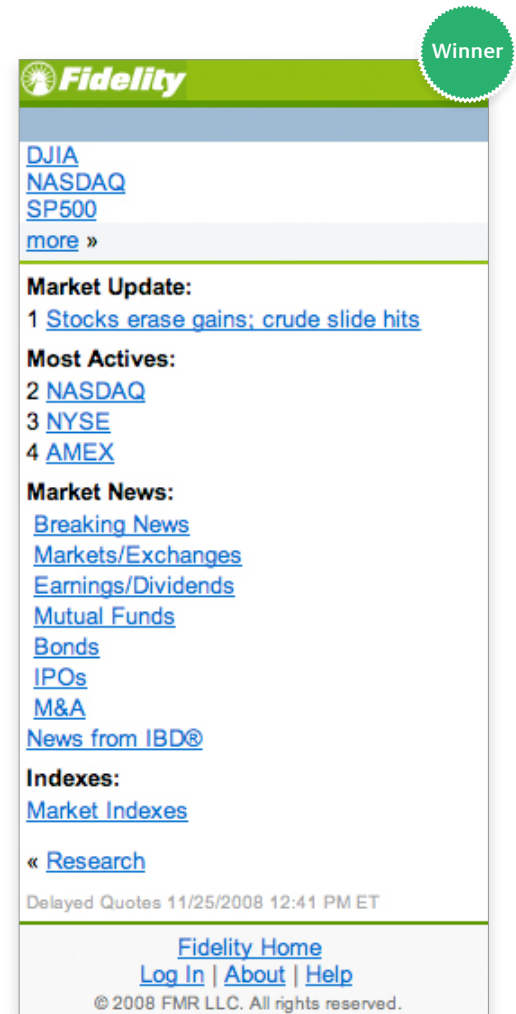
There’s no doubting Fidelity Investments’ target market. This no-frills mobile site for information-hungry investors will never win a beauty pageant, clearly built with function and speed in mind. A generous portion is available free to unregistered prospective customers, including financial news and stock quotes, while a whole host of functions from alerts to trading are available to registered clients.

“Fidelity’s .mobi has more functions and actually allows trading of nearly any investment on a mobile.”

Obama Mobile [obamamobile.mobi](#) (now off-line)

Perhaps the best and worst example of focus is Obama Mobile. The campaign site of President Elect Barack Obama, seamlessly integrated a regularly-updated, straight-to-the-point mobile site, with SMS alerts, donation and viral marketing. Shortly after the election celebrations ceased, so did the site: job done.

“Barack Obama produced a wonderful site: ObamaMobile.mobi (now inactive sadly) that showed how a political campaign could effectively communicate with mobile users through the web.”



Fidelity.mobi home page

Maintain laser focus

(continued)

Sinners

Techmeme

<http://Techmeme.com/mini>

This is an excellent .com site for technology watching, but its mobile website doesn't translate the energy and attitude – or the usefulness – of the desktop website.

“They really didn't figure out they needed to distill their information for a mobile user.”

USA Today

<http://m.usatoday.com>

At the other extreme, too much focus can be equally frustrating. While news is the *raison d'être* of a newspaper, we all habitually turn to the paper for TV schedules – so is it unfair to expect the same of the mobile site?

“The mobile site is quite good, but it is desirable to get more content than is available. On USA Today you don't have access to the details of TV listings and movie reviews.”

Mini-Techmeme
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[Google cutting contractor workforce](#)

Mike Shields / Adweek:
[Is the End Near for Display Ads?](#)

Meera Selva / Associated Press:
[Negotiations to put Beatles on iTunes stalled](#)

Techmeme.com/mini home page

Content is king...but in small bites

“Snackability” has emerged as a guiding principle of the mobile web. People want small bites of content, served up quickly and easily. Keep it short and sweet.

“Mobile users have a shorter attention span – snack-sized pieces of content are great for the mobile channel.”

“Good sites strip out the fluff. They need to have simple and clear navigation and minimal graphics so they’re fast to load.”

Winners

The New York Times

<http://mobile.NYTimes.com>

The mobile New York Times also got a mention for being straightforward: you get the date, their logo, a banner and they get right to the news. Stories are full, but not as extensive as in the print edition.

“They’ve kept it clean, easy to read and crisp – and it’s advertiser-friendly, which can be overlooked by publishers.”

Edmunds

<http://xhtml.edmunds.com>

It may not be pretty but the Edmunds mobile site is a stripped-down, streamlined utility vehicle for finding yourself a luxury car, fast.

“I love xhtml.edmunds.com for its ability to shop for a car one-handed without ever having to scroll.”

Winner

The New York Times

LATEST NEWS

U.S. Approves Plan to Help Citigroup Cope With Losses

By ERIC DASH

Regulators approved a radical plan to stabilize the bank in an arrangement in which the government could soak up billions of dollars in losses.


• News Analysis: Another Crisis, Another Guarantee

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Rubinomics Recalculated

By JACKIE CALMES

Barack Obama’s economic team has many protégés of former Treasury Secretary Robert E. Rubin, but they are setting aside some old orthodoxies.

-  Graphic: Rubin Connections
- Times Topics: Robert E. Rubin
- Obama Names Romer to Lead Council of Economic Advisers
- Economix: External Experts

U.S. »

mobile.NYTimes.com home page

Winner



Edmunds2Go! Automotive Info

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xhtml.Edmunds.com home page

Content is king...but in small bites

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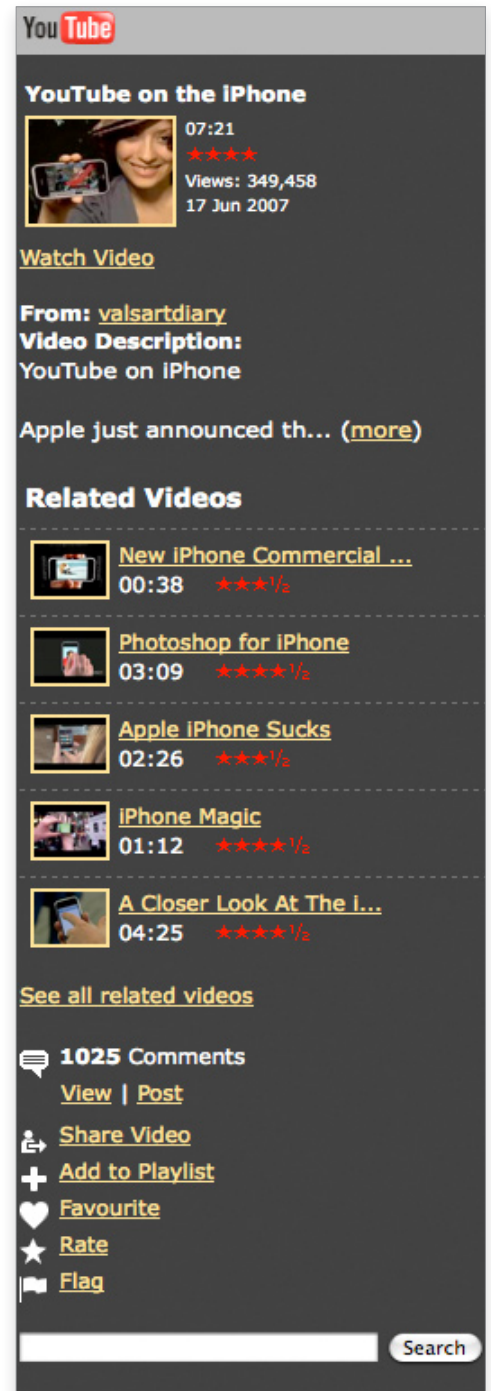
Sinners

YouTube

<http://m.youtube.com>

YouTube should be the perfect appetizer on the mobile, but a lot of the made-for-PC content is considered a bit too full-fat for this medium.

“A good amount of their content is a bit too long for traditional viewing on mobile. Presenting a more snackable means for discovering, consuming and interacting with their video content would help.”



m.YouTube.com home page

Simplify, but don't over-simplify

Too many mobile websites needlessly limit functionality, offering a bare bones experience that leaves the user wanting more. Mobile devices can do many things – use them in new ways to add real value.

“Consumers are starting to expect similar levels of functionality and experiences as they get on the desktop web.”

“One-page mobile websites really need to graduate to fuller, interactive and engaging mobile experiences to keep users interested in the brand.”

Winners

Zagat Zagat.mobi

The Zagat restaurant guides are available in print and online; but the .mobi site is probably the best experience of them all, available when you need it most. The basic (free) site is a rich experience, with maps, contact details and a phone link that dials for you. And the premium edition adds reviews and ratings.

“It shows all the local restaurants and maps from MapQuest for directions. A good lesson: offer basic info for free but entice with premium content.”

ZAGAT Eat, Drink, Stay, Play

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Zagat.mobi home page

Simplify, but don't over-simplify

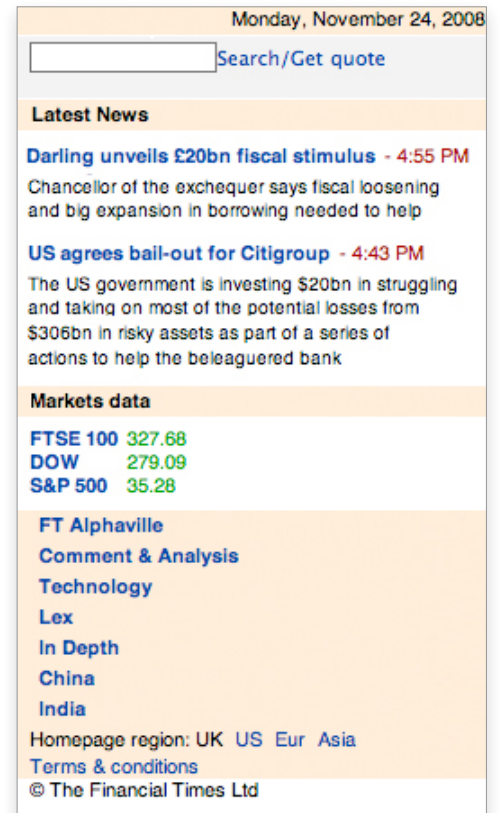
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Sinners

The Financial Times <http://m.FT.com>

The m.FT.com website is little more than a simple list of latest news stories with a search facility. The user experience could be much improved by introducing comprehensive navigation by topic and industry and access to more analysis. With no photos, it loads quickly, but the experience does not reflect the formidable brand it represents.

“The FT site looks terrible on a mobile even though it's designed for mobile. And it's not particularly content heavy.”



m.FT.com home page

Make your site findable

The best site in the world is no good to you if consumers can't find it easily:

- 1 Use the common mobile naming conventions – starting with .mobi – and make sure they all re-direct to your mobile site.
- 2 Make sure your .com site detects mobile visitors and redirects to the mobile site. Also add a link to your mobile site on your PC site and vice versa.
- 3 Make sure your mobile site is picked up by all the main search engines.

“Don't make me guess the URL.”

“I get very infuriated when I get a standard web site on my phone, when I know there is a phone optimized site on a different URL.”

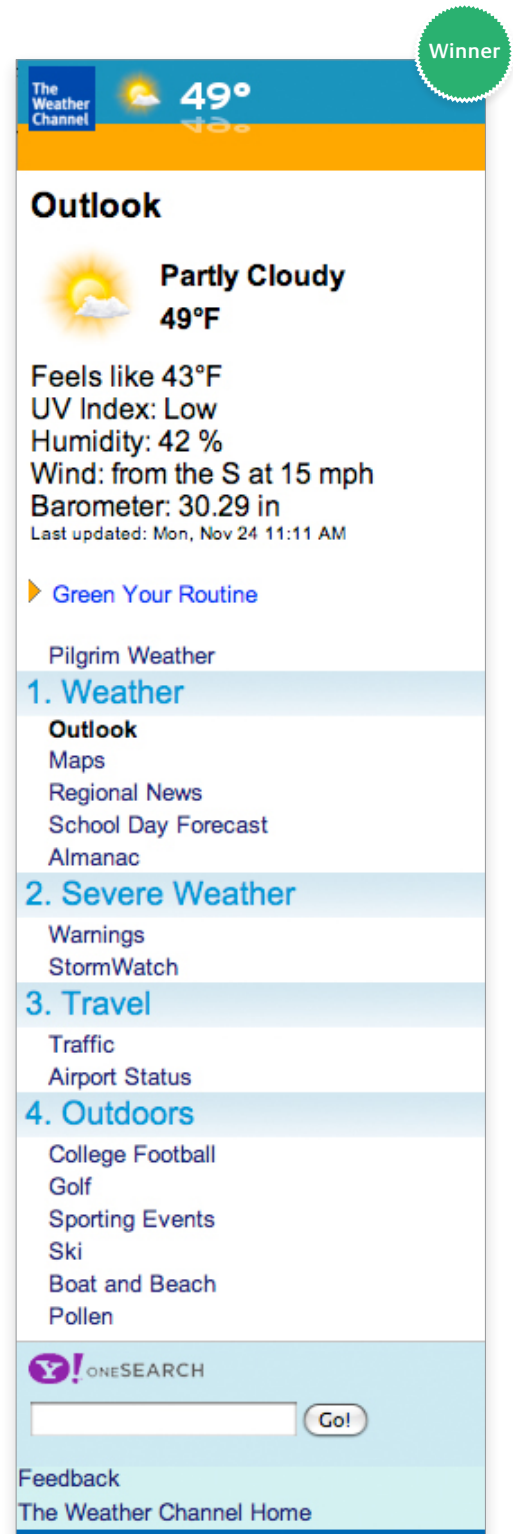
Winners

Weather Channel
Weather.mobi

Weather.mobi uses all the common mobile naming conventions and redirects to the mobile site.

“Having a great URL like ‘weather’ helps – but Weather.mobi also makes sure they're easy to find by promoting the site on their .com website and on the air.”

Take the tour of the Weather.mobi site on mobiThinking.com.



Weather.mobi home page

Make your site findable

(continued)

Sinners

United Airlines
UA.flightlookup.com

“I needed the United site recently. All I could find was the regular website, which proved impossible to use on a small screen. I investigated further when I was back online and there is a mobile version of the site, but you have to know and type in the URL.”

“There are now at least ten different mobile site addresses in common use today, ranging from mobile.yourcompany.com to wap.yourcompany.com to yourcompany.mobi. Smart marketers will register not one, not two, but all of them so that users can find your company, no matter what address they choose.”

Shameless plug: .mobi is the only domain name that also gets a listing in the Internet Zone Files, so your site is more easily found by search engines. “Searchability” is an important part of findability!

Use these icons to show your .com visitors that you have a .mobi – and vice versa:



See our mobile site



See our mobile site



See our desktop site



See our desktop site

UNITED

From: [\(Airport lookup\)](#)

To: [\(Airport lookup\)](#)

[MM-DD]

-

Time:
Any

Advanced options

connections
All

Sort by
Segments

[Check](#)
[Home](#)

Powered by FlightLookup © 2008 United Airlines, Inc. and GoldenWare Travel Technologies, LLC

UA.flightlookup.com arrivals page

Make your site device-aware

There are tens of thousands of different mobile devices out there. If you want your site to serve every user, you need to be able to detect the device they're using and serve up the right content for it. Don't build your site for a minority audience – remember most people don't have an iPhone.

“Don't build a mobile site and not invest the time to detect handsets and serve the correct version for the phone.”

“There are some amazing iPhone sites, but there just aren't enough iPhones: If it doesn't work on a Nokia, what's the point?”

Winners

American Airlines
<https://mobile.AA.com>

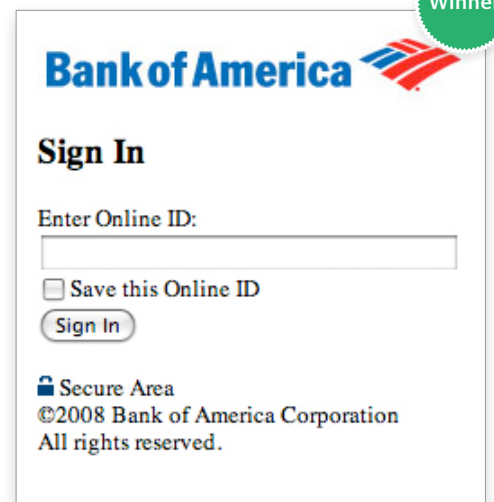
American Airlines was cited for its ease of use, ability to detect devices and full set of services, including mobile check-in.

Bank of America
BofA.mobi

Bank of America sends the right content in the right format for whatever device is making the request.



mobile.AA.com home page



BofA.mobi home page

Make your site device-aware

(continued)

Sinners

Bloomberg

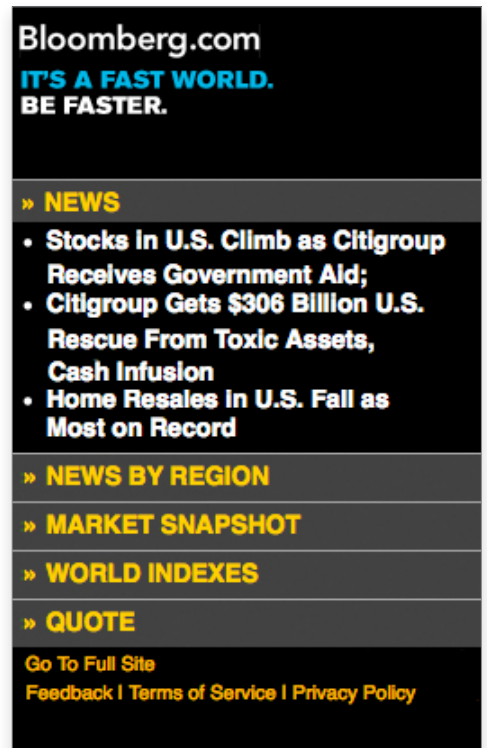
<https://mobile.Bloomberg.com>

When it works, it is fit-for-purpose, but the Bloomberg mobile site doesn't handle the diversity of mobile devices very well.

“Their site does not render properly on different handsets and the menu options are awkward. I walk away from this site frustrated. I won't be back from the mobile.”

Shameless plug: dotMobi's **DeviceAtlas™** exists to address this challenge. It's the world's most accurate and comprehensive device database and an increasing number of top sites rely on it to give every user the best possible experience.

Visit: <http://deviceatlas.com>



mobile.Bloomberg.com home page

Remember the user's details

Remembering your users, their preferences and behavior helps you speed up their access to information. Pre-completed forms and “my favorites” settings are even more critical to mobile than PC sites.

“I appreciate a customized view so my content is front and center.”

Winners

ESPN
ESPN.mobi

“ESPN lets me customize my view so my sports are front and center.”

Weather Channel
Weather.mobi

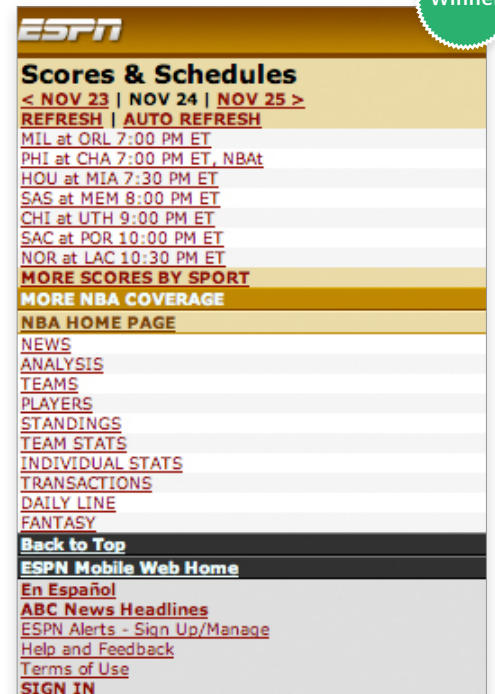
“You can save your location so your local weather is always on the home page.”

Zagat
Zagat.mobi

“Zagat saves your previous location to make searching for local restaurants faster and easier.”

Sinners

A surprising amount of airline websites don't remember the user – so you need to re-enter details for each visit.



ESPN.mobi scores page

Break free from .com thinking

All of the above principles can be summed in this one: don't approach your mobile website with your .com hat on. Yes, it's still the web. But mobile is different.

“Design with the mobile in mind instead of just taking your Internet site and making it mobile.”

“Mobile web sites aren't just repackaging and reformatting - it's rethinking what the mobile user wants and needs and distilling that down to an essential few things.”

Winners

Facebook

<http://m.FaceBook.com>

The immediacy and intimacy of social networking make it perfect for mobilizing. Facebook has seized the opportunity with a super-usable mobile web experience, optimized for different devices – including an iPhone application that's really slick.

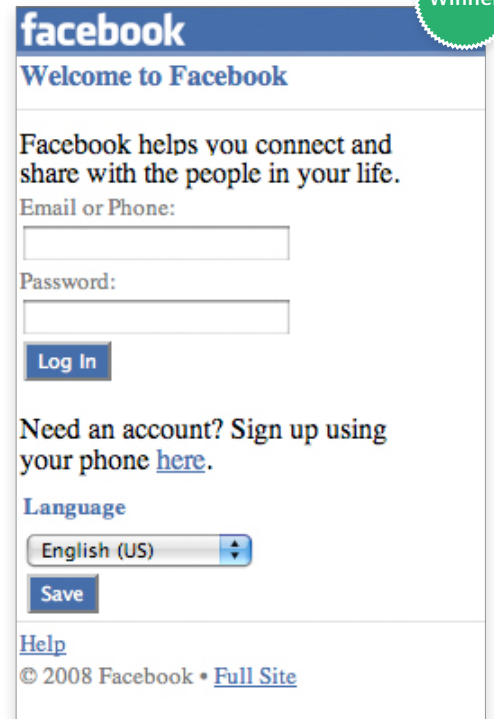
“The Facebook site renders properly and loads quickly. It makes the most of the advantages that mobile offers...a genuine value-added service.”

eBay

eBay.mobi

Auctions become pretty intensive as the end draws near – so both buyers and sellers need to be able to access eBay on the move. eBay appreciates this, and the mobile site makes it incredibly easy to do some pretty complex, but essential, things such as placing bids and monitoring auctions.

“How often have I got really annoyed when I missed out on winning an auction as I couldn't be next to the PC? That problem is solved by eBay's mobile site. I also recently learned that eBay users using the mobile site are more likely to win their auction.”



m.FaceBook.com home page



eBay.mobi home page

Break free from .com thinking

(continued)

The Weather Channel Weather.mobi

Worth a final mention because they really do get it.

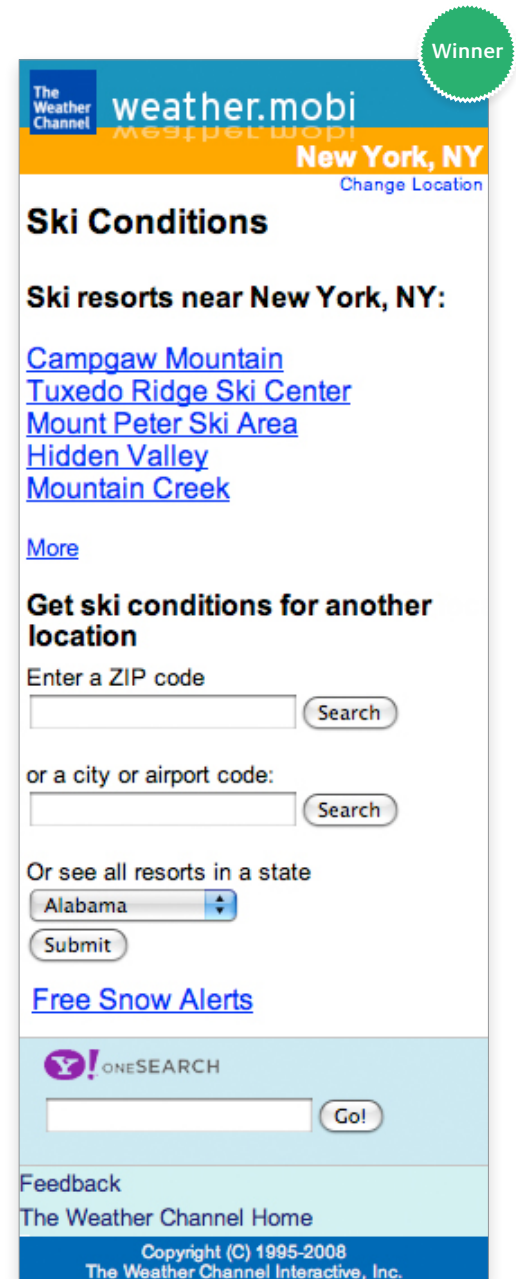
“Weather.mobi does an excellent job balancing design, accessibility and overall user experience. Visiting the site, you get immediate value. There’s simple navigation and clear, unobtrusive advertising. They’ve simply done a fabulous job on this site. The Weather Channel gets it.”

Take the tour of the Weather.mobi site on [mobiThinking.com](#).

Sinners

“Any site that simply dumps mobile users on to their .com site.”

“Just because I can scroll around a big site on a small screen, it doesn’t mean that it’s either fun or useful.”



Weather.mobi ski conditions page

And a few last lessons...

Put the mobile website first

Marketers often run mobile campaigns – particularly SMS campaigns – before they think about the mobile website people will be clicking through to. The persistent web presence should be the center of your mobile marketing efforts.

“The largest mistake I see is brands that think of mobile media first and post-click destination second.”

Don't be bound by templates

Great mobile sites tend to be custom built by specialists. Aesthetics are just as important on the small screen as the desktop web.

“Unfortunately, a lot of big brand mobile sites are still built to templates. Don't forget the basics of marketing just because it's a new medium.”

Test and learn

These are still early days for the mobile web. A spirit of experimentation is important – and good metrics essential. Try it, test it, measure it and try again.

“There are no real right or wrong answers to utilizing mobile. Testing and learning is key.”

About mobiThinking

mobiThinking is a free online resource for mobile marketers getting to grips with the mobile web.

It's full of best-practice advice, opinion, case studies and interviews with leading mobile marketing experts like those consulted in this eBook. The **mobiThinking blog** is fast becoming one of the most visited mobile marketing blogs on the Internet.

About dotMobi

dotMobi is backed by fourteen leading mobile and Internet players who have charged us with one brief: to promote a thriving mobile web. We do this in three ways:



We're the people behind .mobi

dotMobi is the ICANN-appointed global registry for the .mobi top-level domain name – the only domain specifically for designating mobile web content.

We work with domain registrars to make it easy to find, choose and use a .mobi name. We've registered over a million .mobi names so far, making this the clear choice for any site owner who wants to deliver a real mobile experience.

We help people make better use of the mobile web

We run **mobiThinking.com** for mobile marketers and **mobiForge.com**, the leading community and resource for mobile developers.

We develop applications and services to help make the mobile web run better

DeviceAtlas™ is the world's most comprehensive device database. **mobiReady™** is the free testing tool for mobile site compliance and usability. And **Instant Mobilizer™** is a free tool for turning .com sites into mobile sites.

These are part of a growing portfolio of tools and services that drive better web experiences for users, no matter what device they're using.

