How does HTML5 fit into your mobile strategy?

By Wilter du Toit

24 Feb 2012

The thorny issue of the role that HTML5 can play in the mobile landscape has yet to be put to bed for once and for all. As a result, companies are getting bogged down in analysis paralysis rather than getting on with things and enjoying the huge benefits of mobilising their businesses.

In HTML5's case, opinion has polarised around whether the technology truly is the solution to the fragmentation in the mobile space or, conversely, that it will never match the capabilities and offer the same usability as native mobile applications.

The first view is very appealing, as it seems to solve the mobile fragmentation problem. Unfortunately, reality does not match the rhetoric, with the mobile world being far more fragmented than the desktop landscape and HTML5 itself being fragmented in its implementation for the foreseeable future.

This doesn't, however, mean that companies need to bite the bullet and develop applications and services independently for each current and future mobile platform, including HTML5, setting up discrete development teams and scrambling madly to keep all apps in sync and secure.

How does HTML5 fit in?

Firstly, however, let's take a look at how HTML5 fits into your mobile strategy. Does it add value to what you are trying to achieve or is it just the latest mobile buzzword you need to have ticked to keep your non-technical senior executives happy?

HTML5 certainly has value if you are a publisher of content. Like its predecessors, the markup language is very good at enabling the discovery and sharing of content.

An HTML5 app can also act as a good sampler for your full-blown app: customers don't need to download anything to get a pretty good idea of what the native app is all about and the value it offers, and so make a decision in a risk-free environment. Also, who knows, a "lite" version of your app might be just what your customers require if they aren't power users.

If you don't need to interact heavily with your users, for instance they just need to access specific information infrequently or carry out a quick task, it's probably overkill to require them to download a fully fledged app in order to do so.

Let each technology play to its strengths

But, don't try to shoehorn HTML5 into a highly interactive environment. In the long run it is going to take too much time, money and effort, and you'll never match the user experience of a native app. A poor user experience due to using an inappropriate technology will result in poor uptake. Rather, let each technology play to its strengths.

Also, don't expect the mobile web to follow the same evolution as the desktop web. To draw a parallel with older technology; in the early days TV was modelled on radio with talking heads and not too much else. As the capabilities of TV became apparent, this "voice with pictures" was dramatically extended. Likewise, the mobile web experience is going to evolve very differently to the desktop web thanks to features such as mobility, location services, augmented reality capabilities and so on. In this case, HTML5 starts looking very limited as it is primarily intended to extend the desktop web.

The bad news is that HTML5 only works on some high-end smartphones at the moment. For instance, the most popular smartphone in South Africa, the BlackBerry Curve 8520, generally doesn't support HTML 5. On the phones that it does work on, it behaves very differently from one device to the next.

Something more than HTML5 needed

Then, factor in that smartphones comprise 15 percent of the mobile market in South Africa and it becomes apparent that you need something more than HTML5 truly to mobilise your business.

Oh no! So things have just got worse and you now need also to factor USSD, Java apps and other legacy technology into your thinking in order truly to mobilise your business effectively. HTML5 is the least of your worries, it seems.

Not at all. Really to have a mobile strategy means that you roll out the most appropriate service and technology to all users and neither exclude some users with a too sophisticated app, nor force high-end users to engage with a rudimentary (for them) service. The only way this can be done effectively and practically is via a mobile enterprise application platform (MEAP) that includes support for legacy technology, native applications,HTML5, and will support new platforms such as Windows Phone 7.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wilter du Toit is the CEO of Virtual Mobile Technologies.