

My wishes for the mobile industry in 2012

The mobile ad industry is maturing fast. In 2011, just about all players posted healthy growth, building up impressive case studies in partnership with brands who've taken advantage of the mobile opportunity. Revenue are up too, thanks to sustained effort, solid work, and rapid consumer adoption of mobile channels.



By [Michael de Souza](#) 29 Nov 2011

Yet underneath all this positive news, each mobile marketing conference that I attend carries a barely contained sense of frustration and disbelief. The majority of the agencies and brands that these events are intended to woo are somehow just stubborn, too dyed in the wool, too bloody-minded to commit to mobile in any meaningful way. They drink the coffee, eat the free lunch, pocket the promotional pen, all the while nodding and paying lip-service to mobile. Then, back at the office, year after year, they renew their expensive commitments to the same old media mix - print, broadcast and (dare I say it?) billboards!

No wonder Tomi Ahonen's onstage rants gain such rapture. It's like he's releasing some of the collective frustration felt by an industry of innovators whose marvellous inventions are continually pooh-poohed by the majority of brands and ad agencies.

So what is it that's stopping the mainstream from piling onto the mobile opportunity? Perhaps they prefer what's safe, not sticking their necks out? Perhaps they don't want to do anything out of the ordinary? Perhaps some agencies don't want to implement anything too measurable that might reveal that their great creative concept doesn't actually work quite so well in practice? Is there something about mobile that's just too disruptive to the old way of thinking?

Whatever the cause, to mark the end of 2011, I wanted to point the finger directly at some of the potholes and pitfalls that noticed are stopping the industry from achieving its potential. Just so that I don't come across as being too negative about things, I've framed each of these issues as a wish for the New Year - a small commonsense solution that would benefit the entire mobile ecosystem - brands, agencies, media companies and ad networks alike.

Wish #1: For mobile to break out of the silo

Despite the great case studies, positive returns on investment, and success stories that mobile garners, we still see mobile being relegated to 'poor relative' status in most companies' media mix. The average media budget still reads in this order: TV then Print, then Out-of-Home, then Radio, and finally, Digital. Digital, in turn, is split into Fixed Internet, Search (SEO and SEM), Social Media, Direct Email, SMS Marketing and Mobile Internet.

Ironic that the largest single medium on earth nearly always gets the smallest slice of pie.

Also, it's strange that although globally, 50% of all social media is consumed on a mobile device, yet mobile marketing budgets are often tiny compared even to social media budgets.

The real power of mobile lies in the fact that just about everyone has a phone in his/her pocket, always accessible, always on. While we may have occasional brief exposure to billboards, television ads, internet banners, newspaper ads and radio spots, mobile is the glue that has the potential to really hold these disparate components together, providing a continuous touch point and a rich ongoing customer engagement.

For 2012, my wish is that marketing managers at more big multinationals grow the cohesiveness to harness the power of mobile and fully integrate it into every single one of their marketing executions. It's easy, and there's no reason not to make each piece of bought media work a little harder for you.

Wish #2: For ad agencies to reset their priorities

Ad agencies are (with many important exceptions) some of the worst offenders in failing to take advantage of the mobile

opportunity. They're therefore, in addition to being the mobile marketing industry's most important partners, one of the biggest barriers to success. I see several factors at play.

Firstly, agencies earn much higher margins for development work than they do from buying mobile media. Now, it would be naive to think that agencies set strategy based only on what's best for a client, rather than what's most profitable, but it's pretty alarming just how many get away with maximising profit to the detriment of the client. I'm always amazed to see so many brands build obscure apps, when simply designing and placing some banners would do the trick. The only people who can protect against this kind of abuse are the marketing teams who hire the agencies, so if you're on such a team, be vigilant!

The other sins committed by agencies are less direct, slightly more excusable, and just as damaging. Brand strategists tend to be dazzled by shiny new technologies, and enslaved to their appeal, even when they don't reach the majority of a particular target market. That's why we get upset when we see a brand with mass appeal creating an iPhone app somewhere like South Africa, with just 1% iPhone penetration. (Somewhere like Australia or Germany, on the other hand, where iOS is the second most popular handset platform, is less problematic.)

Most pervasive is the lack of a basic technical understanding of the mobile space among key agency staff. This really hampers their ability to put mobile technology at the heart of a campaign strategy. In fact, without a solid basic understanding of mobile, and the faith that what they're doing makes sense, they are indeed taking big risks with a campaign. The fact that they are sidelining mobile betrays a basic lack of confidence in their ability to take advantage of mobile engagement.

So... my wish for agencies is that they could renew their commitment to mobile - in practical ways. Train their staff, stay ruthlessly honest and choose the solutions that make sense for the brand, study the incredible success of their peers and gain the insight and data that allows them to make appropriate strategic decisions.

Then use mobile to amplify and connect every single marketing execution. Agencies have a crucial role to play in the industry, and we really need them to come to the party.

Wish #3: For us all to get over the big numbers already

Every mobile presentation I see has long numbers. These strings of digits, usually longer than telephone numbers, are meant to impress upon us that consumers have adopted mobile technology, and that it's all very, very big indeed. Okay, I've got it. Let's move on.

Instead of quoting numbers like some crazed tween with a deck of Super Trumps cards, let's share insights and data that really shifts our perspective or deepens our understanding of a particular market. Let's look at the 'how?', rather than the 'how many?'. That's my third wish.

Wish #4: For everyone to transcend the debates around fragmentation

We have a fragmented market. There are more handsets, operating systems, development platforms, screen sizes and app stores on offer than ever before. And that fragmentation will only deepen in 2012.

Somehow, in the industry, coverage of the "platform wars" became more important than the basic aim of the platforms themselves, which is, surely, to distribute content to consumers as efficiently possible. Let's remember that, and make decisions based on real data, accurate insights into usage, and a proper match to the target market.

The (browser-based) mobile web provides a set of acceptable constraints within which to market a product or service, along with a universally accepted set of standards that mean you can reach any internet-enabled device. It is, quite simply, the single most efficient medium of content distribution 'platform' ever made.

Once we see a majority of HTML5-capable devices out there, the fragmentation debate will end, and everything will naturally be web-based. In the mean time, that's my fourth wish - that we can all keep it simple, transcend the debate over which

platform is better - and reach all users via the mobile web. Thereafter, marketers can branch out into apps and other more complex executions, but let's walk before we attempt running.

It's an easy shift in perspective, and one which would save the industry would save a lot of breath.

Wish #5: Show me the money

As we enter the mad rush toward the end of the year, there will no doubt be a lot of planning meetings, budget discussions and strategy checks in marketing offices around the world. Good luck for these. I think you know what my final wish is... tl you might fight the good fight for an appropriate budget for mobile in your company.

Have a great holiday season. May all our wishes come true!

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