

Mobile SEO Best Practices: Let's Party Like it's 1999

Mobile SEO Best Practices

Cast your mind back to the time before Google ruled the earth, a time when folks were getting excited about Excite, and Altavista and Lycos were contenders. 1999 was a foreign land with a futuristic language: full of eyeballs, portals and paradigm shifts. It even had a new economy!

Today, the mobile web is at the same stage in its evolution. It's a mystical time again: nobody's too sure what the killer apps are going to be and which online businesses models are going to win (aside from gambling and porn)... but, based on the lessons we learned the first time around, one thing's for certain: search and search engine optimization (SEO) is going to be critical to establishing the mobile web.

For those of us who can remember the wild west of web 1.0, doing mobile SEO properly is a spooky experience - because to do it right means we really need to party like it's 1999. Once again users are unfamiliar with the medium and their shiny new devices, the big brands are making mistakes trying to port their old marketing experiences to the new medium, and search engines are only just beginning to understand what this new web is all about.

As such, this 'Best Practice' paper is designed to provide marketing directors, business owners and new media agencies with a set of a simple, non-technical SEO principles and guidelines that can be applied to mobile web site development today.

Our basic mobile SEO advice is to assume nothing, go right back to basics and think through the following principles:

Mobile Web User Requirements are Different

Mobile Search Engine Behaviours are Different

Mobile Web User Activity is Different

Building Your Mobile Site for SEO is Different

We'll review each of these things as separate chapters below...

Mobile web user requirements are different

This first point is obvious, but it needs to inform the way you go about the job of mobile SEO at a fundamental level. In fact it needs to inform the way you build the very foundations of your mobile site.

You need to remember that your users (and all major search engines) are using the mobile web in different ways and for different purposes.

Phones Are Not Built Like PC's

Firstly, your users are accessing the web using a small keypad, predominantly with one hand (and perhaps with a pointing device - a finger or a stylus), and oftentimes using a standard phone keypad with predictive text capabilities. Further, they may be doing this whilst balancing on one leg at the back of a overcrowded bus during rush hour. This tends to make a difference to their patience thresholds, and makes SEO, usability and 'findability' critical to your mobile marketing efforts.

Mobile SEO rule number one:

If you're trying to attract a mobile audience, then you'd better be good at it and you'd better give them an elegant user experience!

Further, they are now viewing your site through a different screen via a different browser. This may be a fully featured combination like that found on the iPhone, or it may be a stripped affair like the one found on a Nokia 6300. This makes a critical difference to how much content they're able to consume in one go and how much of it can be rendered as you'd like. (It also means that your web production efforts just got more complex by a factor of ten, as debugging the user experience becomes much more than a quick sanity check in IE, Safari and Firefox.)

Mobile SEO rule number two:

You need to recognise that the content and presentation methods of the desktop web will no longer apply in the mobile domain.

Phones Are Not Used Like PC's

Secondly, your users are likely to be using the web because they are in a particular environment. Broadly speaking, these break down into two key areas:

- Users on the move
- Users on the couch (or on the train/bus/commute)

Being on the move means users are likely to be performing task-, location- and/or time-sensitive actions whilst they're on the go, such as searching for a particular restaurant or a particular piece of information such as a flight departure time.

Being 'on the couch' means users are likely to be engaged in a more private, immersive browsing experience, such as watching a movie, IM'ing to friends or catching up on the news headlines.

At this point in time, neither of these environments is ostensibly 'desk oriented' in the way we've come to know and love the traditional web. For example, phones are currently not the best devices on which to do research for an upcoming report, buy a pair of jeans, or do an important video conference meeting. These are the things that a PC or Mac is best suited for - because it has a large display, a keyboard and a mouse. (Note - that's not to say that they'll never be so, it's just how things are today.)

In other words...

Mobile SEO rule number three:

Get focused! Your task is to recognise that your job is to attract mobile users, not desk users, and that any time devoted to the latter is likely to be wasted!

Mobile search engine behaviours are different

Just as mobile web users are different, most mobile-specific search engines (such as Google Mobile, Jumptap, Medio, TapTwo and our own find.Mobi) are also built in different ways.

Mobile SEO exists on a different plain to desktop SEO. Sure, keywords are critical - search engines will always operate on the stuff that's fed into them - but other, newer dimensions such as location, device types and content formats are more critical to and indicative of the mobile web experience, and search engines are beginning to figuring out how best to harness them.

The table below illustrates some of these differences:

Dimension	Mobile Web	Desktop Web	Mobile Search Engine Challenges
Keywords	Few characters	Many/Descriptive	Provision of relevant content based on sketchy user input
Locations (and Categories)	Critical	Not so critical	Simplified presentation of results content in relation to a user's immediate location / need
Devices/browsers standardisation	Many varied	Standardised	Presentation of content in an accessible way and assurance of a good user experience, regardless of device and browser
Mobile site content standardisation	Poor	Generally good	Delivering a high quality user experience from poorly formatted raw mobile site source material
Content formats	Mobile-specific	Generic	Using device information to help improve results by serving relevant content formats - e.g. ringtones for a Nokia 6300, not an iPhone

This is where life as a mobile SEO gets both complicated and exciting. Complicated, because there's more to think about. Exciting because there are more ways to influence the way that we appeal to search engines.

With the above in mind, here's how search engines are beginning to adapt to life on the mobile web....

Mobile search engine behaviours are different (continued)

Fewer Keywords

According to Google's research, the average query on its Mobile Search is 15 characters long, but takes roughly 30 key presses and approximately 40 seconds to enter (See: URL = XYZ). This means that search engines don't have a lot to work with when tasked with providing the user with an experience that roughly equates to the quality of desktop search.

One way in which Google and others are compensating for this lack of keyword action is by providing what's known as 'predictive search' (or 'predictive phrase/query suggestions') in order to help users complete their queries more easily and to help them deliver more relevant search results. You may have already seen this in action: when you key in a search for 'pizza restaurant, San Francisco' on your phone, a little drop down - much like your phone's predictive text writing function - attempts to 'fill out' your search query for you by providing a variety of options such as: 'pizza restaurant', 'pizza take out' and so on. It's a neat way of helping users to conduct a faster search and guaranteeing the provision of relevant results.

But from a technical point of view, this new functionality presents a new SEO opportunity. Just as you might try to identify a set of keyword categories to align yourself with in the desktop web, it's now extremely important to place yourself in the most common 'predictive search phrases' that are related to your business and location.

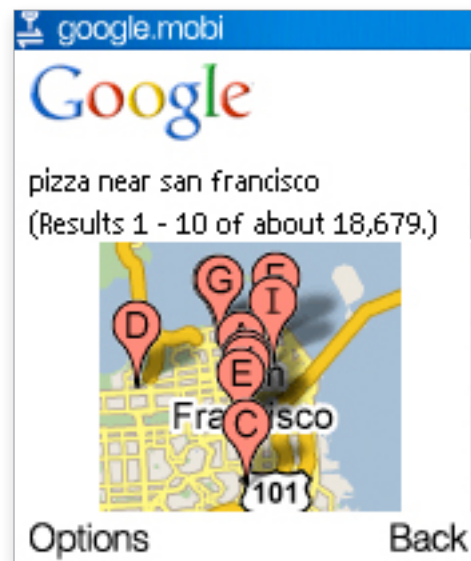
Mobile SEO rule number four:

Your task is to position yourself within a search engine's mobile-specific 'predictive search' categories.

Location, Location, Location (and Categories and Content Formats)

Since a large majority of mobile searches are location and/or task specific, search engines are beginning to present their content in new ways to make results more accessible in the light of the device and user constraints mentioned above.

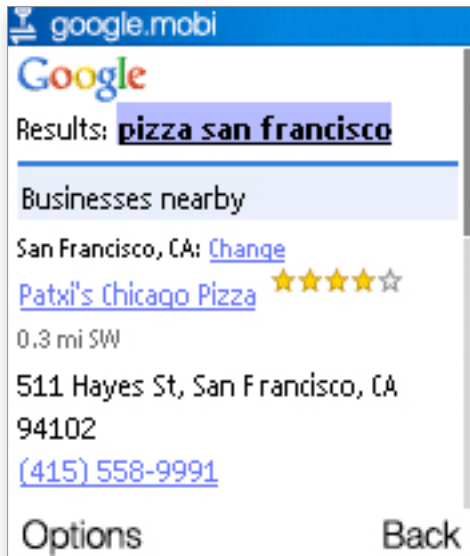
For example, if I search for 'pizza San Francisco' then Google Mobile and others are likely to present a results page like the one below, with a map at the top and (hopefully) location-related links underneath.



This is a very different search experience from the desktop web. What's happening here?

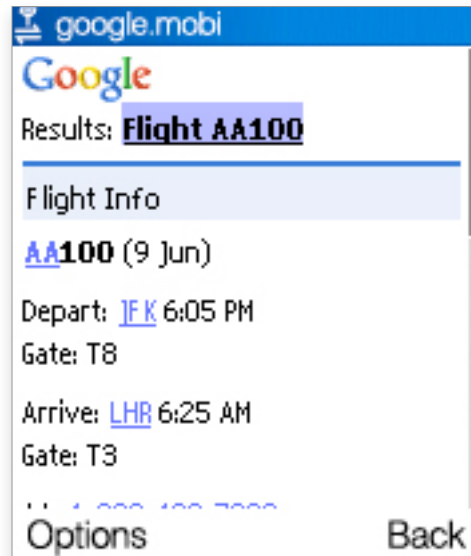
Using Google Mobile as the example, the results page is normally restricted to a list of five sites. And, as our own research has shown, mobile users don't tend to browse deeper than the second results page. So, much like the new predictive search functionality already mentioned, what the search engine is doing is making some educated guesses on the user's behalf to try and get them to the results it thinks they want as quickly as possible. In terms of presentation of search results, when it recognises that we're searching for a pizza restaurant in the Bay area, it gives a heavier bias to those sites that it thinks satisfies these location- and category-based parameters. In other words, much like the way sponsored advertisements are presented in the world of the desktop web, it's giving a 'featured presentation' treatment to its top ranking sites.

Mobile search engine behaviours are different (continued)



In other words, in order to compensate for small screen sizes, search engines are dividing the presentation of their results content into new location- and category-based design layouts.

A different, file format- and category-based example might be a search for 'Snoop Dog Ringtone', whereby sites that contain ringtone file formats and are associated with the important mobile category 'ringtones' are picked out of a range of competing for this style of 'featured presentation' at the top of the normal search results. Another might be a search for 'Flight AA100', which - based on the extraction of special 'microformatted' content and an association with the category 'flights' - will give the 'featured presentation' spotlight to certain flight-related sites.



Mobile SEO rule number five:

Your task is to identify which content categories are being selected for 'featured presentation' results and embed this kind of thinking into the way your content is rendered, so you can increase your chances of being a 'feature pick.'

Device, Browser and Content Standardisation Challenges
Much like the heady days of the birth of the desktop web, one of the main constraints of mobile search is not the breadth of pages available, but the lack of them and the different ways they're built. In addition, just as in the old days, there's a general lack of consensus around the technical specification of devices and browsers. Both of these things speak to a general lack of commonality and standardization in the mobile web site marketplace.

Unlike the desktop web today, companies are creating their mobile properties in a variety of technical flavours, using a variety of implementation techniques (with some deliberately choosing to ignore the mobile web altogether). Whilst from the device end of things, a plethora of different operating systems, form factors and browsers merrily co-exist.

Mobile search engine behaviours are different (continued)

From the search engine's point of view, this makes for a tricky environment in which to deliver a high quality, standardised service - particularly if - like Google - they are trying to recreate the slickness of their desktop experience on the mobile platform. To compensate for this relative anarchy, it looks like they're using a couple of temporary techniques to make the problems disappear: site transcoding and user agent detection.

Site Transcoding

Google Mobile, AOL, Windows Live and others use transcoding software in order to give their users a more uniform user experience. In practice this means that they have decided to impose mobile web site presentation standards of their own, and if your site doesn't conform to them, then they will take your content and repurpose it to the design, layout and format that they feel is best suited to the user and her device.

But why go to all this bother? Well, one reason is that mobile web sites today are so varied in their presentation qualities that it's the only way to ensure a decent look and feel. The other is that there are so few of them available, and so search engines are simply manufacturing an inventory of mobile content themselves by 'versioning' and repurposing non-mobile sites for mobile search use. (In this example, a transcoded version of your web pages are hosted temporarily on the search engine's servers and domain, rather than on your web site - meaning that page url's and links are also transcoded.)

The upshot is both good and bad news for mobile web searchers. Good in that they get more pages to search; bad in the sense that some of their transcoded results will be poorly formatted (images sliced in the wrong places, poor machine-based pagination, etc) and generally not fit for purpose. From an SEO and site owner's perspective, however, the notion of transcoding is all bad.

A potentially poor, unfit for purpose user experience will not encourage repeat visits - and so you may well prefer not to be indexed at all. But more importantly, if you're transcoded this will add very little value to your organic SEO work as the links and URL's that are used will not even be your own (ie, the one's you've probably been encouraging other people to link to), they'll be designed and rendered by the search engines instead. For example, here's the transcoded Google Mobile URL for a popular UK ringtone site: XYZ. Note: if a user arrives at the site via Google, then this is the URL that they would use and bookmark in their mobile browsers, not the real site owner's URL.

User Agent Detection

User agent detection is another form of transcoding which takes your content and - if necessary - re-purposes it in the name of providing a more uniform browsing experience for various device types. For example, an iPhone has different display (and browser) capabilities to a Nokia 6300, and so mobile search engines like Microsoft OneSearch and Google Mobile will reformat key elements of your web pages - images, maps, pagination, etc - to help them fit the target device more neatly.

The implication of all this transcoding work is that those sites that avoid it by conforming to a more standardised means of mobile presentation will probably fare better when it comes to search engine and ranking. And why not, since they are the sites that are most obviously pegged as mobile at the content and code level, and, as such, are those most likely to deliver the most satisfactory search experience.

Mobile SEO rule number six:

If you're serious about your mobile users and developing a mobile SEO strategy, it's best to deliver a top-notch, standards-compliant site so that you avoid any search engine transcoding.

Mobile web user activity is different

Early industry benchmarks show that mobile users conduct their searches using a disproportionately high volume of brand names and - more obviously - location- or activity-based phrase categories.

For example, the brands 'Odeon' and 'Cineworld' and the category 'cinema' are top of the pops in a survey conducted last year (<http://www accuracast.com/search-daily-news/mobile-7471/uk-local-mobile-search-rankings/>) This behaviour is somewhat different from the 2007 desktop search charts from Google, where products (the iPhone) and web services (YouTube et al) were the top global performers. (<http://www.google.com/intl/en/press/zeitgeist2007/index.html>).

As already mentioned, the mobile web is a different beast, used for different purposes, and people are searching for different sorts of things using a different sort of language and techniques. From an SEO perspective, this has a few very important ramifications:

Page ranking and search relevance is no longer determined by scale, but by more immediate dimensions such as location (nearness) or vertical product/business/service category suitability. We've already discussed these things in terms of presentation of search results, but from a search quality perspective, the corner shop is now as important as the mega-brand when it comes to providing users with a comprehensive service. In other words, Sloppy Joe's Pizza is just as important to local a search as Domino's Pizza. As such, it's important for everyone to factor these elements into their SEO work so that you can show up on a search engine's radar and take advantage of the 'feature-style' presentational tricks and biases that will help you compete on a more level playing field.

Mobile SEO rule number seven:
understand the mobile-specific search phrases and categories that your mobile audience is using and optimise your content around these terms.

At the same time, much like the early desktop web, users are happy to take some guidance to overcome their navigational challenges (lack of time, small form factors and screen size restraints). We've already looked at 'predictive search queries,' but from in terms of navigational aids it's worth noting that search is definitely not the only fruit. Search may not even be the number one activity on the list when a user is trying to locate stuff on the mobile web: their primary interface is likely to be their operators' portal or a bunch of pre-packaged vertical directories. To this end, this type of web browsing service is currently at least as important as Google, if not more.

Mobile SEO rule number eight:
Submit your site to all of the most relevant portals, directories and business listings services as these places are also extremely important sources of mobile traffic.

Mobile web site production best practices are evolving

Good mobile SEO takes traditional SEO to the next level in terms of content and code production standards. You need to make your site easily accessible, readable and understandable to a new style of search engine crawler – one that’s even more obsessed with quality and compliance.

Here’s our three top tips on how to do it properly:

One: Make Your Code and High Level Presentation Easily Accessible

Firstly, ensure that your site is crawl-able at the code level. Use the correct headers, don’t block IP ranges unnecessarily, use the correct robots.text file instructions, and ensure that all of the pages you want to be indexed are situated in the public domain (and not restricted by things like password gateways or inaccessible splash pages). Your webmaster will know how to do all of these things, and top search engines like Google publish a good level of detail about how to make your code accessible to its mobile crawlers (see: <http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/topic.py?topic=9346>).

Other actions that will help your general crawl- and index-ability include:

Submitting your mobile sitemap to search engines in order to help them discover you and give them a head start when it comes to crawling and indexing. The majority of them offer help on how to do this effectively (for example, see Google’s Mobile Webmaster Help Centre: <http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/topic.py?topic=9346>).

Ensuring that your navigation scheme is easy to crawl by coding it cleanly and ensuring all of your key content sits somewhere within easy reach of the top level pages. (In general, the deeper you bury your key content within your site, the harder you make it for crawlers (and humans) to reach it.)

Ensure your content contains a sensible level of outbound links that lead to other complimentary and preferably related mobile web pages. This is a basic approach to traditional SEO that appears to be overlooked when it comes to the mobile web. It’s easily explained by the relative value of on-screen real estates: the desktop web affords more screen space in which to present outbound links, whereas the mobile experience puts screen space at a far higher premium - so why use it to entice people away? However, it’s critical not to overlook outbound links because when they’re built around the right partner sites they will help to identify you as a quality mobile property.

Submit your mobile site to DMOZ (<http://www.dmoz.org>), the open directory project that’s maintained on an open source basis by human editors and used as a seeding index for many mainstream search engines such as Google, Yahoo and Teoma. If your submission is accepted it will improve your chances of mobile search engines picking up your domain and starting to crawl your site.

Encourage other, related mobile and desktop web sites to link to you, using markup that’s helpful to your overall keyword strategy. Just like the desktop web, the theory of page rank will continue to flourish on the mobile web. A link to you from a sister site is like a vote for you as far as search engines are concerned (as illustrated via Google’s proprietary PageRank algorithm - see: <http://www.google.com/technology/>). These ‘votes’ are even more helpful if they are built using title tags that include good, descriptive keywords - for example, ‘great pizza restaurant in San Francisco’. And they will be viewed as even more influential when they are created by popular web sites - for example, a link from a restaurant review on the Time Out web site will be more influential than a link from johnsmithblog.com. This is the most critical aspect of any SEO strategy - whether desktop or mobile.

Mobile web site production best practices are evolving (continued)

Two: Make Your Content More Easily Accessible

Ensure that your code is clean and that search-critical information is included in key parts of the content: for example, 'Pizza, San Francisco' should feature in navigation, header tags, body copy links, bold text and the like. Much like us humans, crawlers tend to read pages quickly and give at least as much importance to the way that information is presented as to the actual content on that sits on the page. So think of your content as a hierarchy of different styles and signposts, and ensure that keywords and phrases are well positioned in the overall scheme of things.

Ensure that your content layout is suitably simple for a mobile audience. No use of frames. No use of Flash, Ajax or other presentation methods that may make sense on a desktop but render the mobile experience cumbersome. Again, mobile crawlers will largely follow the browsing patterns and experiences of us humans and our phones. If we bury our key content in inaccessible layers of the page, then just as our Nokia's will struggle to find it, so will search engine crawlers. The golden rule is don't make anything or anyone work too hard to access your content. Different phones and different browsers will splice your content in different ways. Some search engines will decide to transcode it. So, for now, the best way to make your content accessible is to keep it simple - make your page titles, subheaders, content extracts, images and body copy suitably concise, pithy and readable to people and crawlers alike.

Three: Introduce Some New Mobile-Centric SEO Practices

All of the above pointers should be part and parcel of any good SEO strategy. Now for the new, mobile-specific stuff.

Conform to the new W3C MobileOK (level 1.0) standards. Published in November 2007, these guidelines give your technical team all of the code-level instructions they need to make your content mobile ready. They cover everything from the creation of mobile-friendly style sheets (CSS) to correct rendering of tricky content elements such as tables and image maps. For further information,

see: <http://www.w3.org/TR/mobileOK-basic10-tests/>. Whilst these guidelines were created to help webmasters ensure that their web sites would be accessible to mobile devices, they're a critical part of your mobile SEO armory because they also represent the standards that most major search engines build their indexing algorithms around. In other words, you're far more likely to be recognised, indexed and rated as a mobile site if your code is MobileOK compliant.

Use compliant markup language to ensure that the widest range of mobile devices can access, read and render your content. In mobile terms, this means WML (or WAP 1.0), XHTML 'Mobile Profile' (or WAP 2.0) and/or cHTML (or iMode). In short, and at a basic level, if you stick within the W3C's MobileOK guidelines, which are based on XHTML, then you'll be fine (as WML and cHTML are fast being superseded by this standard). In practice, good use of standards-compliant code will again ensure that search crawlers can easily 'peg' your site as a mobile site and thus make you more index-able and a better candidate for inclusion in search results.

Create your content with your target mobile devices and audiences in mind. This means paying more attention to shorter form factors for key important SEO content fragments such as URLs, page titles and metadata - all of which will be re-used in search results pages and so need to be suitably keyword-relevant to the search query in question, but also concise enough to be rendered and read on a mobile screen. Many mobile search engines will help you to achieve this presentation by removing standard elements in URL strings such as the "http://".

Maximise the use of mobile-targeted page content. As mentioned above, all major mobile search engines are now beginning to build in new dimensions to their indexing methods and the presentation of their results - such as, location indicators (eg, 'London'), content formats (eg, ringtones), and anything else that identifies your site as mobile-relevant or mobile-friendly.

Mobile web site production best practices are evolving (continued)

One key way in which you can identify your content with this type of content is to use new 'microformat' and 'semantic' markup standards such as 'hCards' which enable your web page content to be picked out and repurposed by external web and/or application services. For example, if you render the information within a 'Call Us Now' button on your mobile site as an hCard, it may be possible for your phone's browser to re-purpose the source data for dialing a phone call. By the same token, a search engine crawler will also recognise this code-level flourish, and your wider site by implication, as a mobile-centric. For further information, see: <http://microformats.org>.

Four. Building Your Mobile Site for SEO is Different (Health Warning: This is the Sales Plug!)

The best way to build your mobile web site for SEO is by using the dotMobi domain. Now, of course, as a member of the senior management team at dotMobi, you'd expect me to say this. But I can assure you that the use of a dotMobi domain, and the range of free tools that we provide to mobile site developers will, without doubt, give you the best possible platform for achieving great SEO results. Here's why:

A. Building a mobile site on a dotMobi domain gives it instant recognisability and 'findability' to humans and search crawlers alike. Unlike other mobile domain conventions - such as 'm.yourbrand.com' or 'yourbrand.com/mobile' - the URL string 'yourbrand.mobi' makes your property instantly recognisable as fit for purpose, and differentiated from your separate yourbrand.com content experience. The value of this instant recognition is powerful when set in the context of the mobile user and search engine behaviours discussed above. Your quest is to stand out from the pack as mobile through and through - why leave anything to the imagination of a crawler when it arrives at your mobile site or a user when she's presented with a bunch of confusing domain strings on a mobile search results page?

B. Building a dotMobi site means that your URL will automatically feature on the 'zone files' that we maintain for ICANN (the meta-Internet registry organization), and which are regularly requested by mobile search engines, directories and other sites and services as 'seed lists' for the indexing of mobile-centric web sites (in much the same way as they use DMOZ). In other words, the use of a dotMobi domain will automate the beginnings of your search engine and web directory submission process - in fact each month these log files are requested by around 5000 interested parties.

C. The use of a dotMobi domain will help you to keep your URL strings concise and tidy, which in turn will help with user accessibility and usability. Whilst this might seem a trivial point, in practice it can be profound. As already mentioned, the average search query is 15 characters long, but takes roughly 30 key presses and approximately 40 seconds to enter. People are pre-programmed to cut corners and reduce the effort when it comes to text entry on a phone. Making your domains as short as possible is infinitely desirable in this context. And so 'yourbrand.mobi' (14 characters) has an important competitive edge over both 'yourbrand.com/mobile' (21 characters - or 33% more effort) and 'm.yourbrand.com' (15 characters).

D. The use of a dotMobi domain ensures that best practice coding standards are built in at source. In fact, we make many of the key implementation guidelines found in the W3C's MobileOK specification a mandatory requirement for using a dotMobi domain. We outlaw the non-compliant stuff like the use of frames, and request that your content validates in xHTML and renders without the use of 'www'- or we simply won't allow you to publish your site using the dotMobi domain. In practice this means that we can assure search engines and users that dotMobi sites are built to a certain mobile-centric standard, which is something that other mobile domain conventions can never provide. As such, we're making dotMobi a hallmark for the mobile internet - which over time will underscore all of the findability, usability and accessibility benefits mentioned above.

Mobile web site production best practices are evolving (continued)

Last but not least, our world class development team here in Dublin has put together what we think of as a mobile web site compliance tool on steroids: Ready.mobi. Ready.mobi takes all of the W3C MobileOK compliance guidelines and wraps them up in powerful (desktop) web-based testing environment that adds a variety of extra 'mobile ready' compliance functions such as mobile sitemap validation and a bunch of compliance scoring dashboards and detailed compliance reports. In short, ready.Mobi helps your development team deliver the best possible mobile experience for both search crawlers and real mobile users in the fastest possible timescales. It's an awesome toolset for anyone who's serious about building mobile compliant web site. You can check it out at <http://www.ready.mobi>.

It's the web Jim, but not as we know it

It's clearly early days in the evolution of the mobile web. And, much like the formation of the desktop web, it seems that we're destined to make many mistakes as we grow. We're already seeing a mass of poorly re-purposed .com properties that fail to recognise that life on the mobile web is different - sites that offer a brute transcoding or re-styled version of normal desk web content. The result is poor usability, accessibility and finability... and a bunch of frustrated users.

Screen scrapes of the desk web won't cut it. So, when customers ask us how to do good mobile SEO, our first response is usually 'how are you going to re-build it?' The reasons for such a fundamental approach are peppered throughout this document, but to summarise let's just say that whilst the basic tenets of traditional SEO still apply in the mobile world they do so in an extended, more sophisticated form that requires a sensible rebuilding effort. New coding standards and higher levels of technical compliance are required to create the best possible mobile web experiences and the best performing sites in terms of SEO.

So, it's back to the future time. Remember all those mistakes you made ten years ago - cutting development corners and ignoring the crawlers...? Here's your chance to redeem yourself. And remember all the good SEO stuff you've learned since then? Well, here's your chance to take it to the next level. You need to party like the time traveler from 1999.

