

Save Time and Frustration with Mobile First Web Design

It's official: the websites that you design *will* be viewed with mobile devices. Eighty percent of individuals that access the internet now also own a smartphone, and forty-seven percent have invested in a tablet. [1] The internet isn't *going* mobile, it's already there.

But our web design processes are largely influenced by our decades of experience with desktop computers. Even in the classes that I'm currently taking it is common to brainstorm and create wireframes for desktop-sized screens before mobile screens are even considered. We then expect ourselves to squeeze our content down for smaller screens *after* we've made our design choices.

By keeping a mobile-first mindset from the very beginning of the design process we can avoid a whole slew of frustrations. We will also create sites that function better on mobile devices. Here are a few tricks I've learned to make sure that I'm staying on the mobile-first track.

But Wait, Why Bother?

Depending on the complexity of your design, squeezing a site down to a mobile device can be full of roadblocks!

- Forcing CSS through media query hoops to "undo" desktop-centric styling can be frustrating.
- Deciding what content to cut for smaller screens can be a slog with your client if you don't set expectations early.
- The relatively low processing power of mobile devices can turn your fancy website into a broken website.

Think of it this way: why wouldn't you start the design process by catering to the platform that has the most onerous requirements? Set the bar high at the beginning and make sure your site functions on small screens. It's win-win: you'll make better mobile sites and you'll avoid headaches.

Start from the Beginning

The mobile-first mindset begins with the first conversations that you have with your client and the mockups that you create. The earlier you start asking the tough questions for mobile, the less problems you'll have in the home stretch.

Create an Ordered Content Hierarchy

With such limited screen size you should know what your client *needs* to communicate to the user. Create an ordered hierarchy of content with your client. This might look like:

- An ordered list with the most vital content on the top.
- Creating categories for content such as “must have”, “would like to have”, or “discretionary”.

Whatever form it takes, this hierarchy will give you an objective basis to decide what to cut and what to feature on mobile screens. When space is at a premium you want to know what your client considers a “must have”.

Create Mobile Mockups/Wireframes First

Force yourself to mockup a mobile site first even if it's just a doodle on a napkin. This will make the client aware that their content will have to fit on a small screen and it will keep you focused on accessibility.

As an added bonus, I've found that desktop wireframes are even easier if there's a well organized mobile wireframe to jump off of.

Coding for Mobile

Once you have a solid mobile wireframe and an understanding of what content is vital you can start coding.

Well Structured HTML

This is a no-brainer: having clearly structured and semantically sound HTML is going to make your life easier. Having good HTML will make the “expansion” of your CSS easy as pie. Conversely, having poorly organized HTML is going to make styling with media queries a real pain.

Mobile-First CSS

One of the most obvious facts that's missed by web designers is that *the default styles for web browsers are already mobile friendly*. There is nothing about an unstyled website that will break on a phone! Then why do we start our CSS style sheets with desktop-centric CSS and then use media queries to *go back* to something mobile friendly?

When you start writing your CSS stylesheets make the first styles appropriate for mobile devices. Get them finished before you move on to desktop layouts.

This will speed up the load times on lower powered devices and allow you to expand your content with media queries instead of squeezing it. It's been my experience that it's much easier to have a mobile-first layout stretch out over a huge desktop sized screen instead of having to brutalize a complicated layout down onto an iPhone.

Freedom!

That's it! Starting with the platform that requires the most accessibility, flexibility, and clarity just makes sense. Once you have mobile devices covered you'll be safe to start throwing in those discretionary and fun design elements.

It will take some practice and discipline to stay mobile-first, but I guarantee that you and your clients will find it time well spent.



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