



WHY MOBILE SERVICES FAIL



Howard Rheingold

Wed Jul 28 22:15:00 GMT 2004

Score: +130

4 comments above threshold (0 hidden)



LOGGED IN AS: SCOTTJENSON

[Edit: Profile](#) | [Journal](#) | [Friends](#)[Submit Article](#)[Mobile Services](#)

karma: Excellent

moderation points: 0

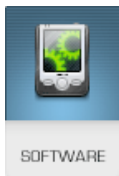
THEFEATURE RSS FEED

SEARCH THEFEATURE

RELATED LINKS

[Default Thinking \(PDF\)](#)[The Simplicity Shift: Innovative Design Tactics in a Corporate World](#)[The Gift of the Gab?](#)[Microscenarios](#)

EDITOR'S CHOICE

[The Quest for a Perfect D... \(+43\)](#)
By Mark Frauenfelder, Apr 20, 2005

SOFTWARE

Designer Scott Jenson says mobile services like WAP and MMS were set up to fail because designers looked backwards at past successes instead of forward to new, untried ways to use mobile media.

Jenson, who, among other things, led the design team for Symbian's Quartz user interface (now known as UIQ) and worked on the Apple Newton, likens the situation to the birth of motion pictures. The first moviemakers nailed cameras to stages. Cinema didn't blossom until D.W. Griffith used close-ups and sophisticated editing to invent the language of film. Jenson thinks the same kind of thinking has prevented WAP and MMS from replicating the accidental success of texting.

"The original use of movies to capture stage plays wasn't wrong; it just wasn't ultimately all that exciting," Jenson wrote in his brilliant rant on "Default Thinking." "Something much more interesting happened as the use of the technology matured. Most likely the same will happen with photos and phones. Something far more interesting will most likely come. We should be getting used to this pattern and anticipate it."

WAP and MMS failed to meet expectations because services were designed by what Jenson calls "default thinking," a clichéd and unquestioned mindset that combines "a weak collection of axioms of design, broad market visions, or rules of execution that aren't clearly articulated. This collection exists in the background, much like the assumption that gravity exists."

The companies who assumed that the coolness of sending photos would automatically make MMS an even bigger hit than the accidental success of SMS were victims of default thinking: "While indeed, there appears to be an intuitive value to 'sending a photo,' additional questions such as 'Do people really need this?' and 'What are they doing in their lives where this is a large value?' need to be asked."

Jenson uses the notions of "design semantics" (the broader motivational issues underlying an act of communication) and "design syntax" (the way the screens and menus look when someone tries to communicate) to illustrate the important differences between SMS and MMS. Turning his own analytical tools on the problem of designing popular and usable services for mobile multimedia, he suggests four potential killer apps.

Jenson has a hunch that gift-giving rituals could drive future uses of MMS. "It is possible to create quite a complex MMS, one that includes not only a picture but sound and text as well. This has clear value as a gift. There could be a small study in the gift giving groups to see how they would respond to photos as gifts..." Then he suggests a simple service that wouldn't require any change in existing SMS and mobile handsets -- enabling users to safely store messages they treat as gifts with symbolic value, a behavior uncovered by studies of adolescent use of SMS.

The product Jenson calls "Tap" would require custom software on the handset to send and receive SMS messages that convey only the time and the identity of the sender. "Although no text is sent, the message isn't really empty of content as it has a sender and an arrival time, both of which can have meaning depending on social context. This text-free message can be thought of as the social equivalent of a tap on the shoulder" that could convey different messages, depending on context. "For a family in a theme park tapping could mean it is time for lunch. It could also mean a lover is thinking of their partner during the day."

Another product would involve even more extensive software on the handset, using the simple procedure of sending SMS but substituting a brief recorded message for hand-entered text, which can be a barrier for those with less dextrous thumbs: "VoiceSMS would be sent with just 2 actions, one to start recording, and another to select a recipient, mimicking the design syntax of most SMS clients today."

Unlike the first two suggestions, which could elaborate on existing technology, Jenson's last suggestion does not address a technology but begins with a problem: the complex arrangement of one-to-one messages and forwarded messages required to achieve a group consensus (about where to meet for lunch, for example). "What we are really after is an SMS style bulletin board system with a new inbox organization. The messages should be collected into groups instead of all shoved together into a single list."

After hearing Jenson speak, and reading his work, I asked him a few questions. Check back Thursday, when Jenson will answer my questions about apps for cameraphones that break out of default thinking, about the significance of user-created apps, and whether any mobile service vendors have tried to implement the products he has suggested.

(Look for "Default Thinking" as a chapter in Harper, R. Palen, L. & Taylor, A. (Eds), (Forthcoming 2004) *The Inside Text; Social perspectives on SMS in the mobile age*, Kluwer, Dordrecht, Netherlands.)

Rate this article by clicking + or -



OTHER ARTICLES BY [HOWARD RHEINGOLD](#)

- [Mobile Phones, Ritual Interaction and Social ...](#)
- [Email, Scale-Free Networks, and the Mobile In...](#)
- [Driving 'n' Dialing](#)
- [Cameraphones as Personal Storytelling Media](#)
- [Farmers, Phones and Markets: Mobile Technolog...](#)

OTHER ARTICLES ON [SOFTWARE](#)

- [What Operators Can Learn From The Recording I...](#)
- [Mobile Enterprise Increasingly Blue Collar](#)
- [Holding Back The Mobile Enterprise](#)
- [MMS Reborn As A Platform](#)
- [Flash Could Soon Show Up on a Smartphone Near...](#)

COMMENTS

SMS hasn't vene begun to be exploited

I think SMS has a lot more potential than most people think. Akin to email ... it's the "killer app" of mobile.

In the USA it's barely been exploited. When Premium SMS, Location, auto-launch of Java apps and other features become more common ... it will be even more useful.

I used to think that mobile devices needed to emulate the IM model, now I realize that the async nature of SMS is it's greatest strength.

[bvolk](#)

Thu Jul 29 04:22:25 GMT 2004

Score: +2 Informative

what about the price..???

the things, that Jenson is mentioning are definitely valid points, but to my believe the price is one of the key parameters in letting a large amount of consumers adopt to new services.

In general I think a lot of users are really interested in sending pictures..what is really turning most of the people off is that it is by far too expensive. Some weeks ago one Australian operator offered free MMS for the first 3 month of subscription, and what happened.. lots of customers started to use the service. One of the main reasons why SMS are so popular in the Philippines is that it is comparably cheap compared with voice calls. WAP 1.0, also called "Wait and Pay" by the industry, failed in Europe, cause it had a lousy system and because of the high charges for it.

I think the main problem here is the old school monopolistic "telecom thinking" of the cellcos, meaning first think of the income than of the consumer. We should not forget that in the starting phase of SMS one was able to sent them for free. I do not want to know what would have happened if the industry would have known before what a big source of revenue SMS was going to become. Maybe they would have started to overcharge it from the very beginning, which would have probably totally slowed down its diffusion process.

By the way I do not want to diminish the success story of SMS, but to my opinion mobile e-mails are by far the superior texting service. Regarding the fact that a texting system based on mobile e-mails is very well functioning in Japan and with the regard to the convergence of telecom and computer and media industries I think mobile e-mails will totally substitute SMS.

Concerning WAP 2.0 and i-mode services, I think that the demand for such services has really increased in Europe in the last year (look at the increasing number of customers of Vodafone life and T-Zone for instance). WAP 2.0 with its new programming language xhtml (not WML anymore) and its packetbased billing is pretty much comparable with the successful i-mode services nowadays.

But on the other hand have you ever compared the mobile internet with the fixed line internet....I do not even want to refer to the fact that mobiles got smaller screens and so on...

In the mobile internet you nearly have to pay for everything, even for websites of footballclubs, for example. Such websites I would perceive as public relation and they should be free to access for that reason. And somehow I miss the point why I should pay for such a service when I can access it for free in the fixed lined internet!!

To my opinion the customers' satisfaction/value of the internet compared to the mobile internet is at least 10 to 20 times higher. If I would access all the webpages via mobile internet I am accessing via the internet per day, I really had to pay a lot. Also there is the freedom missing I usually have when I am surfing the internet. If I want to do that in the mobile internet I needed a very big wallet.

I sometimes have the feeling that the carriers do forget that the fixed line/WiFi services are still a kind of competitor for the mobile services.

Why shall I sent a low quality picture for a high price via my mobile when I can sent a high quality picture with my PC for nearly no costs??!! I know I know, of course there are good reasons why to sent a picture immediately from your mobile and you do not have your high quality digicam with you all the time. But probaly most consumers, who have just taken a pic with their mobile, just think well I do not sent the pic now via expensive MMS, I better wait until I get home and will sent it via my PC!!

Alright I got to stop otherwise I will go on for ever....

[geronimo](#)

Thu Jul 29 14:36:52 GMT 2004

Score: +4 Informative

Gifting

I think the whole area of gifting is interesting.

Scott's gut feel is amply borne out by the fascinating research of [Professor Richard Harper](#) whose paper "The Gift of the Gab" is worth getting hold of if you can. He focused on text messaging and uncovered loads of evidence that gifting was an important ritual in youth SMS'ing:

We have attempted to illustrate this fact by focusing on the obligations associated with giftgiving.

We have demonstrated that under certain conditions and in specific contexts, mobile phones can be used in gift-giving rituals, taking on particular meanings in young people's daily lives. These situated and embodied understandings become intertwined with the technological constraints and possibilities of the phones and, in turn, influence further uses and understandings.

The text message, for example, provides the basic ingredients for a gift. As we have seen, between peers and in the right context it may be offered as a symbolic gesture of friendship and allegiance.

Furthermore, he found evidence that the value of such gifts increased, the more that the recipient could see that the sender had invested in the composition.

Services like [Cognima](#) as I [blogged](#) earlier in the week (as a result of reading about it here) can also play a huge part in this area.

[RussellBuckley](#)

Thu Jul 29 18:55:06 GMT 2004

Score: +3 Informative

Market Dreams

I think one of the biggest reasons for the mobile internet not being a major player in the internet market or for the high prices for mobile related services simply stems from the fact that everyone is supposed to make money. If we were suddenly offered the best mobile services and the latest technology, say a company like nokia has to offer, while at the same time being competitive with the internet market – a lot of people would be losing out on a lot of money. It boils down to the fact that history has a way of repeating itself.. in this case for financial benefit. It is not that the market cannot give us the very latest, but a case of it will not. The market will start you from scratch and make you pay your way up the scales till the golden goose has been squeezed for all that its worth and then at that penultimate moment will you be upgraded and suddenly a better service appears almost like a godsend. We will have to wait our turns till someone decides that they have made enough money. We will be constantly put through the rigmarole of taking 3 steps back and 2 steps forward so that the treasuries will always be full. For technology to prevail at a faster and equitable rate – the sms principle should be followed. Offer all value added services freely, keep your costumers up to date and forget about the money. Obviously im dreaming.. oh well.. No harm in dreaming.

[Tryptophonix](#)

Thu Aug 05 08:11:59 GMT 2004

Score: +1