



Forums in the Age of Mobile

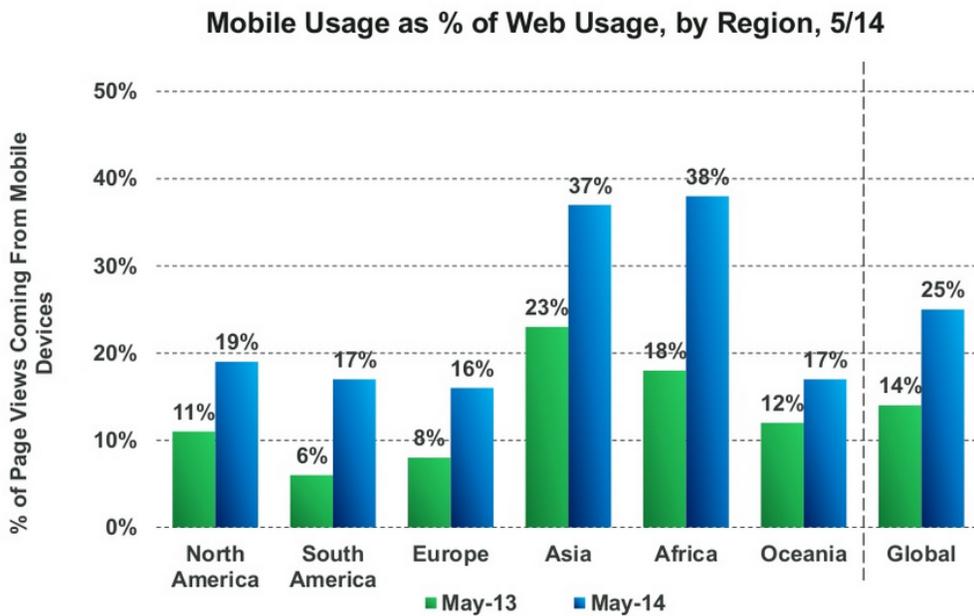
As traffic from mobile devices increases, forum owners should retool to ensure a good user experience and should be on the watch for changing user behaviors.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent data shows that close to 20% of overall website page views are coming from mobile devices in North America and Europe. Many Vanilla customers are seeing a much higher percentage than this when looking at traffic to their community forums.



@KPCB Source: StatCounter, 5/14.

Source: Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers

Some enthusiast and B2C customer forums have exceeded 50% mobile traffic, whereas B2B customer forums are more in line with the overall data. Regardless of your own audience, mobile traffic and its consequences cannot be ignored. The proliferation of smart phones that are always connected to the internet creates a huge opportunity for forum owners. However, the forum platform must provide a good user experience on mobile devices if they want to keep users engaged.

Forum owners should think about retooling their communities to create a good user experience on mobile and should also look for signs of changing user behavior.

Software Usability

Forums typically support long-form discussions. Creating and consuming long-form content on a small device with a virtual keyboard differs from doing so on a desktop computer. A forum designed for the desktop will have poor usability on mobile because the site navigation consumes a lot of screen space and many interface elements designed to be used with the precision of a mouse pointer rather than fingers. An interface designed with a touchscreen in mind can provide excellent usability.

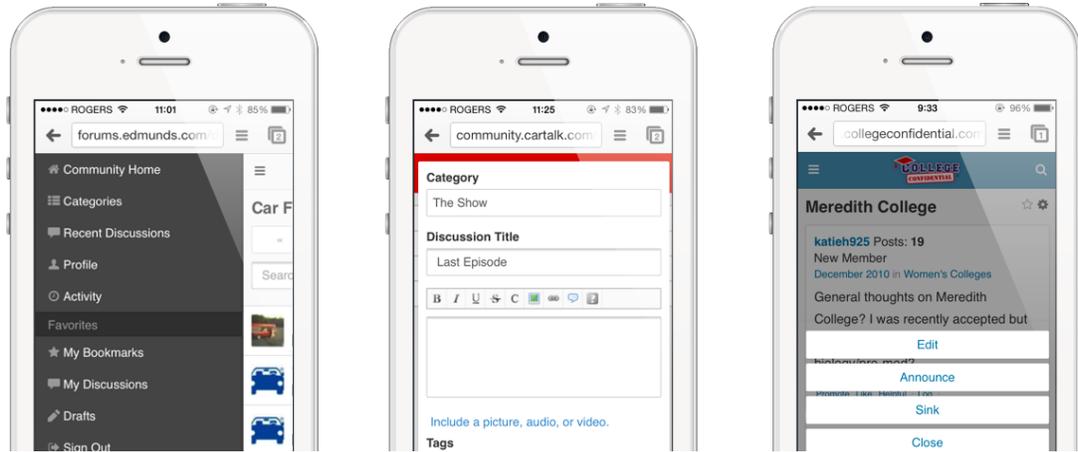
Good mobile forum usability will provide the following:

- Workflows designed around swiping and touching
- Large touch targets that are easy to hit with a finger vs. small links or icons
- A simplified experience that strikes the right balance between usability and functionality
- Familiar interface elements used by popular platforms such as Apple and Facebook
- Removal of workflows that require a keyboard or mouse, such as frequent copying and pasting or filling out long registration forms.

Forum software providers can deliver a good mobile user experience in a few different ways. Of course, each method has its own pros and cons.

1) A responsive design that adapts the layout based on the screen size. A well-designed responsive theme can be very versatile and cope with any browser size. However, responsive designs are usually designed for the desktop first and mobile second. For example, large image files used for a desktop theme may be needlessly downloaded on a mobile device. This can quickly use up precious (and costly!) cellular data.

2) A second theme that renders on mobile device browsers. This allows you to have both a mobile first and desktop first experience, since the theme being displayed depends on the device. The downside is that there are two code bases to maintain if you have a customized theme. (A good mobile forum theme will be minimalist so as not to interfere with the content itself and should not require much customization.)



3) A downloaded application native to the mobile device (an app). A mobile app makes sense if it helps integrate community into other content or services delivered via the app. On the technical side, mobile apps support more functionality than a mobile browser and can better integrate with other features of the phone, such as the camera. Mobile apps have their challenges, however, such as supporting the many devices and different operating systems, not to mention getting users to bother to download updates. There are third party apps that plug in to popular forum software and can make the forum more mobile friendly. Some of these apps display ads and share the revenue with the forum owner.

Changes in User Behavior

How does mobile change the way members use the forum and how does this impact forum management?

There is no indication that mobile has significantly changed why forums are used or what they are used for. Community managers should be on the lookout for feedback from users or trends that correlate with increasing mobile traffic:

- *Peak times:* Given that users are always connected, are traffic patterns changing and are community managers and moderators scheduled accordingly?
- *Content:* Are mobile users causing a change to the quality of the text? The introduction of community specific abbreviations can help build culture but can also scare away new users. Spelling mistakes and typos can impact SEO and turn off some users.
- *Popular categories:* Are users less likely to visit more remote categories (lower down or nested in the navigation)? Mobile users are used to opening a site and thumbing through a list of recent posts. Displaying recent discussions across all categories on the mobile homepage is recommended.

The impact of mobile on forums cannot be discussed without mentioning the explosion of social networks that are predominantly used on mobile devices. The goal of a forum isn't to compete with apps meant for people to share the day's ephemera. Forums provide a place where people with a common interest or problem can have meaningful discussions, and this requires users to be verbose. Where forums compete with social networks is for the users' attention. Modern forum software uses the same habit-forming techniques as social networks: notifications, mentions, badges, and activity feeds, to name a few. These features will ensure that your members come back often at various times of day, including times where they can only access the forum via mobile.

Is your forum community ready for mobile? As the percentage of users accessing the web using a mobile device goes up, offering a good mobile user experience is becoming increasingly important.