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Responsive vs. Mobile Design: What's the Difference?

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The rise in mobile devices for business and personal use has brought with it huge changes in the way people look at websites. Many sites may see more than half of their traffic coming from mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets.* And as more people research products and services, consume content, and make purchases on mobile devices, companies need to find ways to give those mobile visitors a good user experience.

Is your website engaging and converting mobile visitors? Does your website look good and work well, no matter what device people might be viewing it on? If you answered “no” to either of those questions, it’s time to find out whether your website was developed with responsive design.



How can you tell?

Your website may be mobile-friendly, but that isn't the same as mobile responsive. Here's the difference:

When you have a “mobile” or “mobile-optimized” site, you really have two different websites — the main desktop site and a second mobile site. The desktop site is developed to recognize when it's being viewed on a mobile device and switches those users to the mobile site, laid out in a way that is easier to view on a smaller screen.

This dual-site approach prevents users from having to pinch and zoom in order to view the site on mobile devices, but the mobile site's content is often pared down from what's available on the main desktop website. You can often recognize these types of websites by looking at their URLs, which often are preceded by the word “mobile” or the letter “m.”



What is responsive design?

Responsive design allows developers to create a single website that recognizes when a visitor is using a mobile device, and responds to the size and needs of that device. A responsive website reformats itself to look as useful and effective as possible no matter what size screen it's being viewed on. Elements may rearrange themselves depending on screen size, and some elements or features deemed less important for mobile viewers may drop off entirely.

Since responsive design results in a single, flexible website, it also helps improve how that website looks and works on laptop and desktop computers by responding to the size of the browser window. Changing the size of your browser window will alter what's displayed on the website.



What are the advantages of responsive design?

SIMPLICITY

Having a separate mobile site requires more maintenance. You need to ensure that content from your regular website is included on your mobile site and that your mobile site works on different devices. When you build a website with responsive design elements, you only have to maintain one site, and you never have to worry about making changes in two places to make sure your main and mobile websites match.

CONSISTENCY

With a responsive website, users get a good mobile interface without missing out on essential elements of your desktop site. Responsive websites can display the same content in different ways depending on the device being used. For example: a gallery of photos might be paged through by swiping on a smaller device or by tapping on a larger screen ... but both are hosted on the same website.

As the market for devices becomes more fragmented, there will be an even wider variety of screen sizes and shapes than what we already see today. A website with responsive design will look good on any screen, not just those with certain dimensions.

SPEED

Responsive sites load more quickly on mobile devices, because the device doesn't first try to load the entire desktop version. If your users have older devices or are using a slower internet connection, a responsive site will load faster than a mobile site.

COMPETITION

Responsive design is the mobile standard today. Not long ago, Web developers would typically ask whether clients wanted a responsive website — now, it's a given. Is your website mobile responsive?



With a responsive website, users get a good mobile interface without missing out on essential elements of your desktop site.

What should you look for in a developer?

First, look for a company that has a responsive website. View their website on different mobile devices and on your desktop computer. What information does it include? how does it respond to different devices? A developer that's comfortable with responsive design will be able to build a website that works well on a wide variety of devices.

Ask to see a portfolio of past work for any company you're considering hiring to create a responsive website for you. Closely review other websites it has built and look for elements you'd like to include in your own website. Note how each of these websites respond to different devices.

A responsive website will help your company reach a wider audience and keep people engaged no matter what kind of device they use. Talk to your developer about building a responsive website or reach out to a company with experience in responsive development.

*SimilarWeb's State of Mobile Web US 2015 states that roughly 56% of consumer traffic to leading US websites is now from mobile devices. Mobile traffic in Q4 2014 was roughly 49% on average, for these top sites. The report is based on the company's analysis of the top 10,000 US websites in 24 categories. It does not include app usage.





Ready to Take the Next Step?

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