

The Resolution Evolution

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There's a digital evolution taking place - one with exciting implications for Web designers. Low resolution monitors are quickly being replaced by new, higher resolution monitors. As the higher resolutions equate to more screen real estate for developers, we are understandably anxious to forget about the old low res monitors. In a perfect Web world that could be done. Unfortunately, the reality is that we must continue to design for the lowest common denominator. The question is, what is that lowest common denominator - 800x600 or 640x480 pixels?

According to StatMarket, the majority of people today are browsing using monitors with 800x600 screen resolution. In fact, that percentage of users is now around 55% and appears to be holding steady. Use of monitors with a screen resolution set to 1024x768 pixels is increasing at a rate nearly identical to the rate that the 640x480 screen resolution is disappearing. Apparently, the 640x480 surfers are upgrading to resolutions greater than 800x600 - primarily 1024x768 although much higher (and costlier) resolutions are available.

There are designers who feel that ignoring users with older equipment is the best decision - it allows for more freedom of design, fewer compatibility problems, and may even be more cost effective as the site won't have to be upgraded when the low res monitors are truly no longer an issue. I have even heard designers make the argument that it's not worth worrying about since people with old equipment are used to having things look bad.

On the opposite side of the fence, there are those who design to 640x480 pixels. They restrict and modify their desired design in order to make the site useable and appealing to the broadest possible audience. So what's a wise Webmaster to do?

Considerations

- Stay current on usage statistics. Even though only an estimated 12% of surfers are using monitors with screen resolution set to 640x480, consider how that percentage translates into actual numbers. Do you want to turn away even 10% of your site visitors? If you have 10,000 unique visitors a month, you will be turning away (or at best, annoying) more than 1,000 people a month. Is that an acceptable situation?
- Carefully evaluate your target audience. For some sites, the technology required to build necessary functionality into the site may already restrict viewers. If your target audience is exclusively high-tech folks, you may also feel secure in designing for higher resolutions. Those users will most likely not be using older monitors.
- For existing sites, review log data regularly. It often reveals some surprising statistics. For instance, on some sites I have recently found an alarming number of people using WebTV.

Solutions

- Ignore 640x480.
By designing only for the middle-of-the-road and higher resolutions, most of your site visitors will be happy and, who knows, maybe Y2K bugs will take care of the rest.
- Design for 640x480.
Your design may be limited but no one will have to use that annoying sideways scroll bar. Generally this will be a fixed-width design with pages or tables set to something less than 600 pixels to allow for white space (or less than 545 pixels for WebTV).
- Develop separate pages.
Designing sites with additional content for users who are able to accommodate more information on screens set to greater than 800x600 pixels is a wonderful but work-intensive solution. An entrance page allows visitors to make their own selection or an auto-detect script can be used transport them to the correct pages.
- Design pages that degrade well.
Target the design for the most common 800x600 pixel width but rather than ignoring 640x480 screens, make concessions so that pages will degrade well on those low-end monitors. This can be accomplished by setting tables or page width to a percentage rather than a numeric value. One problem with this solution is that lines of text can be too wide for those surfing with high resolution monitors and browser windows wide open.

My Thoughts

As a surfer, I'm offended if it is suggested that I change my resolution or browser to view a site. As a designer, I wish we could force everyone to use the most common settings and browsers (but would never suggest it). For most situations, I choose what I see as the middle of the road. I optimize my design at the 800x600 pixel width but make certain that the pages are completely viewable on 640x480 resolution monitors. I usually accomplish this by either using page width percentages with some content dropped into fixed width tables or by building pages with a fixed pixel width of just under 600 pixels - a width that looks best when viewed at 800x600 but is still completely viewable at the lower resolution.