



BEYOND THE REDESIGN

Mobile-First Mandate, Desktop-First Organisation: The Gap No Redesign Will Close

On channel conflict, org charts, and why a responsive website does not make a mobile-first business

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The Mandate and the Machine

Somewhere this quarter, in a town hall or a board pack, a senior leader has declared that the organisation is now mobile-first. There is a slide. There is, quite possibly, a photograph of a smartphone held in a hand. The redesign is already commissioned: the site will be responsive by spring, the grid will reflow, the buttons will grow fat enough for a thumb. Everyone nods. The mandate has been issued.

What has not changed is the organisation that received it.

This is the pattern worth naming as 2013 closes, because the mobile-first slogan has now travelled out of the design studios where it was born — the Mobile First argument is barely three years old, responsive web design not much older — and into the mouths of executives who mean something quite different by it than the designers did. To a designer, mobile-first was a discipline: start from the smallest screen and the harshest constraint, and let that constraint clarify what actually matters. To the executive issuing the mandate, it has quietly become a procurement instruction — buy a responsive template, and the problem is solved by summer.

It is not solved by summer, because the constraint that matters was never the screen.

What "desktop-first" actually means

The desktop-first organisation is not defined by its website. It is defined by everything sitting behind the website: the org chart, the budget lines, the approval routes, the numbers people are paid against, and the unspoken assumption about where a customer is and how much time they have when they deal with you.

Consider the ordinary machinery. The web team reports through one function; the contact centre through another; the branch or store network through a third; and the app, if it exists at all, is a project off to the side with its own budget and a six-month gap between releases. Each has its own targets. None of them owns the customer who

starts a task on a phone at a bus stop, gives up, and finishes it on a laptop that evening – because that customer is a rounding error in every single channel's figures and the whole responsibility of nobody's.

I watched one organisation discover this the slow way. Its analytics – checked, naturally, on a desktop, in a weekly report no one ever opened on a handset – showed that roughly a third of visits now arrived from a phone, up from almost nothing two years before. Mobile converted at a fraction of the desktop rate, and the comfortable conclusion was that the phone was a device for browsing, not for buying. The real cause sat in a form: a fourteen-field application, laid out in two columns for a 1024-pixel screen and a mouse. On a phone it became a vertical mile of mis-tapped boxes and a date-picker that demanded the dexterity of a surgeon. Customers were not refusing to buy on mobile. They were refusing to complete a desktop form with their thumbs. The responsive redesign fixed the two columns. It did not touch the fourteen fields – because the fields belonged to a compliance process, and the compliance process belonged to a department that had never been in the room.

That is what desktop-first means. The defaults – of process, of ownership, of what counts as done – were all set when the customer was assumed to be seated at a desk with a keyboard and a spare ten minutes. A responsive stylesheet changes how those defaults are displayed. It does not change the defaults.

The mandate says	The organisation still does
"We are mobile-first"	Funds the mobile channel last, out of what the desktop projects leave behind
"One seamless experience"	Measures each channel on its own and rewards each team on its own number
"Design for the phone first"	Signs the design off in a boardroom, on a projector, at desktop scale
"The customer is on mobile"	Routes every exception to a back office that works nine-to-five at a PC

The objection, and the real bill

The fair objection is that this is a touch unfair. A mandate has to start somewhere; a responsive site is a real improvement; and culture more often follows tools than leads them. All true. No leader can restructure an enterprise on the strength of a traffic chart, and the redesign is not wasted work. Mobile-first as a slogan is at least pointed at the right horizon.

But we should be honest about the size of the bill the slogan is quietly deferring. Mobile-first, taken seriously, is not a design decision made once; it is an organisational decision made repeatedly. It means someone owns the journey that crosses channels and is measured on it. It means the phone is the screen a design is approved on, not the one it is grudgingly shrunk to fit. It means the fourteen-field form actually gets shorter – which means the compliance conversation finally gets had – because the constraint

of the small screen is allowed to win an argument it would always lose on a desktop. The small screen's real gift was ever only this: it forces the question what is essential here? The desktop-first organisation spends its entire redesign budget making sure it never has to answer.

The mobile-first mandate is easy to issue and hard to mean. Issuing it costs a slide. Meaning it costs an argument with every function that was built back when the customer sat still.

So the useful thing to say, as 2013 ends, to any leader who has just announced the mandate is simply this. The redesign is the cheap half, and you have already bought it. The expensive half is not on the web team's backlog at all — it is in the org chart, the budget cycle, and the sign-off room. Until it shows up there, mobile-first describes your stylesheet, not your business.