



Ability Commerce Whitepaper

The Skinny on Screen Resolution

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Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
BACKGROUND: WHAT IS SCREEN RESOLUTION?	2
WHAT ARE YOUR OPTIONS FOR DESIGNING AROUND SCREEN RESOLUTION DIFFERENCES?	3
What Size Should You Choose?	3
Fixed Resolution Vs. Percentage-Based Resolution	3
CURRENT BROWSER AND SCREEN RESOLUTION STATISTICS	4
IMPORTANT POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN REDESIGNING	4
BEST-PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS	5
ABOUT ABILITY COMMERCE	6

Executive Summary

Determining the optimal screen resolution design for your direct-marketing website is a constant battle between making sure all your visitors can view and navigate your site easily, and making sure you're keeping a look and feel consistent with the predominant technology. Boosting conversions is the goal. This paper provides the latest statistics, things to consider about screen resolution when redesigning your site, and current best-practice advice from the direct-marketing intelligence experts at Ability Commerce.

Background: What is Screen Resolution?

The image on a computer monitor is made up of thousands of little dots, which display the image on your screen. Each of these dots, or "pixels" is a different size, depending upon the resolution setting on your computer. The higher the resolution setting, the greater the number of pixels on-screen, and the smaller each of those pixels is.

Suppose, for example, your monitor is set for 800x600 resolution. This simply means that your display area is 800 pixels wide by 600 high. If you change that setting to 1024x768, you'll have many more pixels on your screen, so you'll see more information without scrolling, and the images will appear more well-defined. But remember, the pixels are now smaller as well, so any text or graphics with a "set" pixel size will be correspondingly smaller.

Naturally, designers of e-commerce websites want to base their designs on a screen resolution that will display maximum, easy-to-use information above the fold on their pages, with minimal horizontal scrolling. Like any site designer, they want their sites to be as easy to view and use as possible. However, e-commerce designers have an additional and ultimate goal: they want to choose a screen resolution that will maximize conversions.

Does a site that caters to the lowest common resolution at any given time achieve that goal? Not necessarily. Let's look at some other variables before discussing which options are best for Internet retailers.

What Are Your Options for Designing Around Screen Resolution Differences?

You have two choices to make when designing your site, as regards screen resolution. What size should you choose? And should you choose a fixed resolution or a percentage-based resolution? Let's look at these two choices in further detail.

What Size Should You Choose?

There are a dizzying variety of screen resolution options available on the market today. In addition to computer screens, many users also browse the Internet (and, increasingly, shop) on high-definition televisions, smartphones, and electronic book readers. Resolutions measured by information services include 1024x768, 1280x1024, 800x600, 1152x864, 1600x1200 and 640x480. Even with all those choices, about 10% of site visits register as "none of the above" or "unknown" screen resolutions.

But the choices get even more complicated from there. First of all, not all users maximize their browser windows. And don't forget the browser itself—each browser type has slightly different measurements for things like toolbars and scrollbars, all of which affect the display area for a web page. To complicate matters, users may add additional toolbars like the Google toolbar, further clouding the issue of how much real estate you really have to sell your products on each page.

Let's simplify things a bit for now, and assume that if you build a fixed-width site, you're going to optimize for a user who's got a fairly standard browser configuration and they've maximized their browser window. From here, you've got essentially two choices. You can optimize for 800x600, thus catering to the lowest common configuration and ensuring a clear view for all users, but showing lots of white space to users at higher resolutions. Or you can optimize for 1024x768, thus staking out a middle ground and ensuring a good use of space for most users, but locking lower-tech users into horizontal scrolling.

Fixed Resolution Vs. Percentage-Based Resolution

Many Web sites use tables for layout, and set the table width to a fixed number of pixels to eliminate horizontal scrolling at lower screen resolutions. A page optimized for 800x600 should have a maximum width of about 760 pixels. This is a fixed-width design.

Now remember that someone viewing the page at a higher resolution will see a lot of empty space. The page may display more attractively if you center the table and give the page a complimentary background color. Or you can go with the option of choice for many "information-based" sites: percentage table width.

Percentage-based designs stretch by basing the overall layout on a percentage of monitor real estate. Design conforms to the available space, regardless of browser configuration.

It's easy for content to wrap in unexpected ways, especially for e-commerce sites which tend to have many images, buttons, forms, and other fixed-width elements. Speed of site load times is another major concern with percentage-based table design because such design can dramatically slow down your site's display.

Because of the unpredictability and speed concerns of percentage-based site design, it's not recommended for retail websites, and you won't see it used often on the largest (and most successful) e-commerce sites.

Current Browser and Screen Resolution Statistics

It's important to understand how most users view your site in order to determine things like the best sizes for images and text, and the overall width and height of key elements on your pages like the header bar and the shopping cart.

Here are some of the latest browser statistics to consider, from February 2008.

1024x768	(47%)
1280x1024	(30%)
Unknown	(10%)
800x600	(7%)
1152x864	(3%)
1600x1200	(0%)
640x480	(0%)

(Statistics from thecounter.com, Jupiter Online Media)

Important Points to Consider When Redesigning

If you have Google Analytics or another web analytics tool at your disposal, your first step should be reviewing statistics on browser use and screen resolution for your own unique visitor base.

However, also think about your conversion and bounce rates. If you feel conversions are too low, and bounce rates are too high, part of the problem may be due to an outdated look and feel to your design, or a design that's not optimized for the visitors you *want* to attract. Hence, it's important to consider not only your existing traffic, but also overall statistics and trends across web visitors overall, not just at your site.

The most important consideration when planning a redesign is agility and flexibility. Mobile users are becoming more prevalent with the advent of computer-like smartphones. More and more users are becoming more computer-savvy and customizing settings like browser window size, adding toolbars which affect window size, and changing display font size to suit their preferences.

You'll never be able to design and test around every scenario. And even if you could, the landscape will likely change by the time you launch your next site redesign and it'll be time to start all over again.

You can take the pain out of the screen-resolution dilemma by building a site that can be quickly and easily modified to accommodate evolving technology. Don't let your design team make you feel this is a decision you'll be "stuck with" for two years or more until your next complete site

overhaul—even if you make the “perfect” choice now, it won’t be perfect in two years, guaranteed, so be sure your solution is agile enough to make changes when the market demands them.

Here are few points to be sure to review with your web development team or your solution provider:

For internal design teams:

- How easy will it be to change our design if current standards change?
- How adaptable is our design to display all or portions of our content on small-screen mobile technology?
- How adaptable is our design to accommodate assistive technology and larger-than-normal browser font settings?
- For solution providers:
 - What screen resolution do you recommend for best conversion rate, and why?
 - Do you have a set resolution I must use if I choose your solution, or is it customizable for my unique site?
 - How often is your solution reviewed and updated to stay current with the latest user trends?
 - How easy will it be to change my resolution if I go with your solution?

Best-Practice Recommendations

Conventional wisdom, and most articles on the best screen resolution size, says that you should design to the lowest common denominator so that everyone is assured of seeing the content on your site easily. Right now, following conventional wisdom still means designing for an 800x600 resolution. However, designing for 800x600 means that the vast majority of your users are going to see a whole lot of empty space when they view your site—and that means those users are going to have more trouble finding what they’re looking for.

Go back to your goals. What are you really trying to achieve as you think about design considerations such as screen resolution? Sales, sales, sales. That makes the answer simple: choose the resolution that will generate the highest conversion rate.

Performance statistics for Ability Commerce’s current clients indicate a fixed resolution of 1024x768 achieves the highest conversion rate. Look at most of the top-performing e-commerce sites and you’ll find they’re currently designed with that profile. Here’s why:

- Percentage-based design works well for informational, text-based sites, but data-driven retail websites contain so much content pulled in from content management systems, graphics, and fixed-placement-sensitive elements like shopping carts and “Add to Cart” buttons, that a percentage-based design will look messy in a hurry—users may not find what they’re looking for as quickly and easily as you intend them to, and that means high abandonment and bounce rates.
- 1024x768 resolution offers the most information, without scrolling, to the most users—keeping more relevant, critical information above the fold and to the left.

Bottom line? You know your visitors, so any good design team, programmer or software solution provider should listen to what you have to say about them and take into consideration your own concerns and questions. They should assure you of agility. And as of early 2008, they should very likely recommend 1024x768 fixed width resolution: this is the configuration that translates to the highest sales.

About Ability Commerce

Ability Commerce and its sister company, Marketing Concepts, focus on the bottom line: higher sales and cost-effective customer acquisition for today's direct marketer. A trusted provider of IT, software and full-service marketing solutions to catalog companies since 1986, Ability Commerce programmers and marketers leverage what they learn via hands-on operation of their clients' multichannel marketing efforts. Building that knowledge into our products and services creates cost-effective, fast-launch web solutions and unsurpassed integration with major back-end fulfillment systems such as Escalate Retail (Ecometry), Order Motion, CommercialWare, and Mail Order Management (MOMS).

For more information about our best-practice marketing solutions please call 561-330-3151, or visit us on the web at www.AbilityCommerce.com.