

Wireless World: Mobile-phone Web browsing

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Internet browsing and search features on mobile phones are influencing the decision-making process of consumers, motivating them to buy goods and services to which they might not otherwise have been exposed, experts told UPI's Wireless World.

A new study on the trend, "The Role of Search in the Wireless Market," was released earlier this week by Yahoo! and the analysis firm Compete Inc. in Boston. The study tracked Internet search and transaction activity over a 12-month period and found that search plays a "distinctive role in the decision making process" of consumers looking to purchase products and services -- particularly wireless products.

"For wireless marketers, understanding the significant impact search has on offline purchases is critical to building a successful multi-channel marketing strategy," said David Rubinstein, telecommunications category director for Yahoo! search marketing.

Some cutting-edge companies have been integrating mobile phones into their customer service strategies.

Dan Krzesinski, senior vice president at Océ North America in Chicago, a unit of the \$3 billion Netherlands document-management and printing company, said his company's field technicians have been using "Web-enabled mobile phones" for customer service applications.

Search capabilities on the Web -- as well as custom applications --

accessed via mobile phones can improve productivity of workers searching for information when they are in the field, said Tim Bradley, chief executive officer of AirClic, a firm in the Philadelphia area that makes mobile-market apps.

"A market change is happening," Bradley said.

According to the study by Yahoo! and Compete, researchers analyzed the online behavior of 2 million Internet users and surveyed more than 785 Internet users who employed mobile search to help them with their most recent wireless purchase over the previous 12 months.

Among the study's key findings:

-- The number of consumers searching online for services is increasing -- dramatically. By the end of the year 23.9 million consumers will perform a search online for wireless service, representing more than \$12.6 billion in potential annual revenues. The number has increased 72 percent since 2004.

-- Search has become an essential decision-making tool for consumers in the market for certain products and services.

-- Search also influences offline purchases.

-- Wireless searchers are "valuable customers" for mobile companies. Among the five leading wireless carriers -- Cingular, Nextel, Sprint, T-Mobile and Verizon Wireless -- customers who arrive at one of their sites as a result of a search are "nearly three times more likely to sign up for online self-care" than non-searching consumers. Furthermore, searchers have 17 percent more online self-care sessions per month than non-searchers.

"The complexity and importance of wireless service has driven consumers online to gather the best and most relevant information," said T.J. Mahony, managing director of Compete. "Search is not only a navigational feature of this activity, but also a fundamental component of who and where consumers will evaluate."

Experts said new technology developments will make it easier to navigate the Web on a mobile phone in the future -- and again increase the number of those who surf while mobile.

Many carriers, such as Japan's NTT DoCoMo, are recognizing that current biometric sensors in place on a growing number of PDAs provide an excellent touch-pad surface, allowing the finger that authenticates to become a mouse, for optimal navigation.

"This is going to make a big difference for Web browsing on a phone as well -- and the technology is well on its way," said a spokeswoman for AuthenTec, an international technology developer for the mobile market.

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