

Everything you know about the Web is wrong

Author Biography

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Your customer is ready to buy from your online DVD store. Credit card in hand they search for Nicolas Cage films. Click. The screen goes blank, then shows the results. They look at 3 items, waiting for a new page each time. Finally they see the film they are looking for - 'Leaving LasVegas'. The customer clicks the 'Buy now' button and (after a suitable delay) is asked for credit card details. If they make a mistake it will be yet another click, yet another blank page, and yet another wait. No wonder that as many as 70% of people that were ready to buy never make it to the till.

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But this clunky customer experience is ok - after all the web is the web and your competitors have to put up with the same limitations? Wrong. Google has blasted through the complacency of the last 5 years with web pages that deliver the power of applications like Word and Excel straight to your customers screen. No strings , no downloads , no technical gimmicks - they're web pages Jim , but not as we know it.

Take a look at Google Maps (<http://maps.google.com>). A nice little mapping site you might think - lovely pictures of Dublin , Cork or wherever you live. Now try this - click on the map, hold the button down and drag the mouse backward and forward. Hang on a minute, this doesn't feel right. The map moves with you and displays the new parts instantly. Pure Web pages - no Flash or other downloads. What's going on?

Even worse for Irish Business, take a look at Kayak.com. It may be a US travel shop but no doubt your competitors will soon be as slick. Select a flight from Dublin to Madrid. Notice how the page automatically guesses your Home airport as you start to type. What's more, it gives a list of the available destinations from this airport - no more 'sorry we are sold out'. When you select a flight it lets you know what it's doing - no more delays, blank pages or 'please wait' messages to scare to customers away.

What both Google and Kayak.com have in common is part of what is beginning to be called Web 2.0 – a willingness to give customers what they really want, including a usable web experience. Suddenly, your online store is looking as dated as the early 90's when blinking text and 'Under Construction' signs were last in fashion. What are you going to do about it?

Happily, while the entire notion of what the web can do has been turned on it's head, how you build websites has not. The slickness shown by Google, Kayak.com and an ever increasing number of websites relies on a trick called Ajax. While before web pages were delivered as one big block, Ajax uses lots of smaller blocks. The ingredients of each block, how they are generated and how your customers see them remain the same.

'Leave-no-customer-behind' is the motto of successful online stores – the site must be usable by every customer who wants to shop there. Ajax scores on this front as well. It is available to your customers as all the mainstream web browsers from the last 5 years already have it. For the 1% of customers that don't have these, it's easy to fall back to the traditional, but slightly clunkier version.

We're no longer in the Dot.com bubble and return on investment is the order of the day. How can we deliver the Ajax customer experience on a limited budget? The good news is that it can be added to your existing company web site. The bad news is that left to technical people alone, Ajax and Web 2.0 is so powerful that the customer is going to be left confused by a website that behaves like nothing they have seen before.

You need to take control on behalf of your customer, identify the bottlenecks where customers are dropping out, and gradually add Ajax to smooth your customers experience and increase your online sales.