

NlightN Multimedia -

A Real World View



eCommunication: making it work

Part 9 – Compatibility

Few things are more annoying than trying to open up an eCommunication only to find that it doesn't work, for one reason or another. Right at the beginning of any eCommunication project, you need to think about how to ensure that it's compatible with the maximum percentage of your target audience. Having said that, it's not generally wise to cater for the very lowest common denominator since that tends to lead to dull, dull, dull eCommunication.

Compatibility can be broken down into three main areas: Human, Platform and Browser.

Human Compatibility

This is by far the most difficult aspect to cater for and quantify. By Human Compatibility I mean ensuring that the eCommunication is delivered in a form that is most compatible with the user's requirements.

On one level, this involves the *accessibility* of your product. In other words, if your target audience includes people with sight, hearing or mobility issues, how does your eCommunication cater for that? Screen-readers are a technology that seeks to read



Kevin Partner writes a regular bi-monthly column for **PCPro** (www.pcpro.co.uk), the UK's leading IT magazine and is an expert in eCommunication in all its forms. He's worked in the field since 1989, has seen fads and technologies come and go but the fundamentals of good practice remain the same.

out the visual information presented on a desktop or, more commonly, in an internet browser. Unfortunately, screen readers tend to lag behind internet technology and, to be honest, many web designers also lag behind. If I were to give one tip for improving the accessibility of your web-delivered eCommunication it would be to move from using tables to lay out your pages to CSS (Cascading Style Sheets). Think of a style sheet as being similar to Styles in Microsoft Word and you can see that it becomes much more simple to increase the font size across the entire site for someone who has difficulty seeing. Style Sheets also reduce the complexity of a page and make it much simpler for a Screen Reader to cope with.

Combining sound and vision in your eCommunication obviously makes sense but you need to make sure that your multimedia presentation makes sense with the sound off or the monitor turned off. This does NOT mean that you should repeat every word of a voiceover as text: if your bullet points are any good then they should be able to tell the story on their own.

The other aspect of compatibility is to make sure that your eCommunication is compatible with your end user's world view and expectations. This is very important and a huge subject on its own but broadly speaking you should be aiming to present your end user with exactly what they expect and to bear in mind their world view when you write your copy.

Platform Compatibility

Firstly, you must consider whether you're developing entirely for the PC world only, whether you want to include Mac and/or Linux users and/or mobile platforms. Looking at the stats for one of our websites, I can see that 97.4% of our visitors use Windows in one form or another (87.5% of these are Windows XP, 8% Windows 2000, 3% Windows 98) and 2.5% use Macs with only 0.1% using Linux. This puts our development into perspective and it's clearly more important to us that the site works in Windows XP than any other platform. Theoretically, of course, it should be possible to develop a website that works across PCs and Macs. Theoretically!

The situation becomes harder with CDROMs. A CDROM created on a PC will not work on a Macintosh or Linux system (unless they use Windows simulators). If you end up creating for cross-platform delivery, you'll need to select your development tool very carefully. Macromedia Director is one of the few tools that can create multimedia presentations for both platforms and RealBasic is the only development tool I know of that can create applications for all three.

The other issues you must consider are the screen resolution and colour depth. 61.5% of our visitors use 1024x768 as their native resolution and 17% use 800 x 600. This

latter figure really surprised me, I must admit, and shows the value of gathering real data. It just goes to show how many people like their desktops nice and chunky!

80% of our visitors' computers support 32bit colour depth and, in fact, less than 1% use 8-bit (256 colours) or less. When it comes to design, then, who do we prioritise? The 99% or the 1%? If we can implement our design so that it suits all 100% then great, but it's hard to justify making a compromise on behalf of the 1%.

Browser Compatibility

You need to consider both the browser itself and any plug-ins that you may require.

Of the visitors to our site, 90% use Internet Explorer in one form or another: 97% of whom use Internet Explorer 6. 7% use Firefox and 2% use Safari (for the Mac). So, it's clearly vital that our site performs well in Internet Explorer.

We use Flash and we can see that 64% of our users have version 8 and 30% have version 7. Since we require version 7 as a minimum, a total of 94% of our visitors can use our materials. So, that means 6% can't: quite a large proportion. The obvious answer would be to make our work compatible with version 6 but this would mean that it would lose crucial functionality so, in this case, we've decided to keep the functionality but lost 6% of our visitors.

Finally, you need to be aware of the internet connection speed of your potential audience. In our case 80% of our visitors use a broadband connection (with 7.5% unknown) and 12% use dialup. That last figure is too big to ignore so all of our materials work on both broadband and dialup. Does that mean the broadband users miss out? Not at all: we simply provide separate versions for each. The only difference is that the sound quality is lower for dialup.