

Why WAP isn't? as bad as people say

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Why WAP isn't? as bad as people say

By Mike Street

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It's unlucky that the acronym for Wireless Application Protocol (WAP) has such an unfortunate rhyme! Even more unlucky for WAP, it burst onto the mobile communication scene with lavish promises from the Mobile Operators (you know who you are) of "The Internet on your Mobile" and "Take the Internet with you".

That really was a load of WAP.

So, a few years on we can ask, like Frankie Goes to Hollywood, "WAP, what is it good for?"

More than you might think, given the current deafening silence from those same Mobile Operators.

The rise (and rise) of SMS is instructive. This has gone from nowhere to everywhere with practically no promotion from the networks. Type SMS into Google and you get 52 million hits! In China in 2003, 220 Billion SMS messages were sent. During 2003 in the UK alone, 30 Billion were sent, which equates to 500 for every man, woman and child in the entire country! What is going on here?

Well SMS is cheap, not cheap enough perhaps but, up until a couple of years ago, much cheaper than calling. So it was a viable alternative to making a mobile phone call, everyone could send and receive them, and it didn't matter what handset you used or what network you were on (or even which country you were in).

Much the same is true of WAP. Most handsets sold this century in GSM markets are compatible. Costs, especially using GPRS, are very low, as long as the information is optimised for the handset. Actually, it costs less to read your email with GPRS than to send an SMS. How times change!

And people are using it, too. In the UK in December 2003, the number of WAP pages viewed was over 1 billion for the first time. The Mobile Data Association (MDA) forecasts 13 billion for 2004 as a whole, up from 9.2 billion in 2003 (against an original MDA forecast for 2003 of 8 billion).

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All this is in the face of complete indifference, if not outright hostility, from the networks. The problem for them is that, as mentioned, WAP is cheap. You can get all the mobile email you need via WAP to your handset for around one tenth of the cost of a RIM Blackberry data subscription. And please don't ask how much the running costs are of a laptop mobile data card! A while ago, one of my colleagues used more data in a month than the cost of the mobile data card itself. Since then the networks have introduced more reasonable price bands, but he now gets all the email he needs on his cellular phone via WAP for one hundredth the amount spent during those expensive 30 days. And he doesn't need to carry a laptop around with him, wait for it boot, wait again for it to download the mail, and balance it on one hand whilst holding his coffee with the other and his mobile phone in a third!

One of our customers for our mobile email software reads his mail whilst shaving in the morning ? he can find out what has been happening overnight without having to get his computer out, dial in and log

on. Another browses whilst tending to his cows, miles from mains electricity. Yet another admits he reads his mail in board meetings ? so far luckily no-one has noticed his mobile sitting on the desk in front of him.

And there is for WAP, most likely, no new device to buy, either. Nothing additional to weigh down your pockets or to find room for in your briefcase. And it isn't just good for email. You can also look up train timetables, get news & sports results, find medical information, find a restaurant and see what's on the TV tonight.

And you can do all this, with the one electronic device that most people have with them all of the time ? their mobile phone.

So ? no new expensive devices are required, no high monthly charges are incurred and there is no waiting. No wonder the Mobile Operators aren't impressed!

Mike Street is Technical Director of Fast Communications Ltd (FastComm) in the UK. FastComm provides, installs, supports a variety of innovative communication products. For free downloads please visit <http://www.fastcomm.co.uk>

### **WAP for Webmasters**

**By James Scott**

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What is WAP?

The Wireless Application Protocol (WAP) is a standard technology that enables Cellular Phones to connect to the Internet and view stripped down Web Pages and Services.

WAP uses similar concepts to the desktop Internet we are all familiar with. The Cellular Phone has

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embedded WAP Micro-Browser software capable of displaying WML (Wireless Markup Language). The user enters the URL of a WAPSite into the Micro-Browser and this request is forwarded to a WAP Gateway. The WAP Gateway resides within the Cellular Carriers network providing an interface between the Phone and the Internet. The WAP Gateway retrieves WML content from conventional web servers on the Internet and returns it to the Phone to be displayed by the Micro-Browser.

### Why do we need WAP?

Is another markup language really needed? In a word – Yes! The constraints of mobile devices and networks such as low bandwidth, high latency, low memory, and small display capabilities mean conventional Internet protocols (HTTP/TCP/IP) are unsuitable for use in the wireless environment. It is not feasible to automatically translate HTML designed for a high-resolution monitor onto a three or four line Cellular Phone display. WAP is a standardised way to provide efficient and reliable access to Internet based information and services via Cellular Phones.

### How to WAP enable your existing website

If you already know HTML you will find learning WML very easy. There are less tags and most follow the conventions of HTML. The main differences between developing for the Web and Wap are the small screen size, monochrome images only, and slow connection considerations. Well-designed WAP applications provide a simplified web-like experience.

WAP is about providing access to relevant information from any location – news, email, sports results and banking have all been successfully translated to WAP. End-to-end security is provided by WAP so applications such as Banking and Mobile Commerce are as safe as conventional E-Commerce sites. Intelligence can be added to your WAP applications by using WMLScript, which is similar to JavaScript.

Anyone can write WML content and upload it to a web server in the same way as publishing HTML pages. Server side scripting such as Perl, PHP, ASP, and Java Servlets can all be used to output dynamically created WML content. In many cases the hard work of creating the backend of the website has already been done and the WAP conversion is a relatively quick and painless process.

The constraints of the WAP environment and tight syntax of WML are actually a blessing in disguise. Developers have much less scope to format the layout of content compared to HTML design and thus

deployment time is dramatically reduced.

### Why choose WAP?

By choosing WAP you are building applications and services that are accessible across all WAP enabled Phones and Cellular networks (GSM, CDMA, TDMA and 3G in the future). You will reach a much wider audience as the number of Cellular phone users now exceeds that of Desktop PC users. WAP is an evolving technology that is capable of maturing as the wireless data industry evolves and is an extremely powerful tool to extend your website's reach beyond the conventional Desktop PC.

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James Scott Editor of WAP-Resources.net – The WAP Developers Resource [www.wap-resources.net](http://www.wap-resources.net)



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