Google Proposes Some Design Principals for Web Applications

Thomas Claburn, InformationWeek

At its developer conference in May, Google revealed that it plans to launch a Chrome Web Store to sell Web apps later this year.

But selling a Web app is an odd concept. There's no software to download and install in the traditional sense. There's no transference of data noticeable enough to justify a transaction. Installing a Web app involves downloading a .crx file containing configuration data, but it's not like downloading Linux, Mac, or Windows software.

Buying a Web app amounts to buying a URL. And that seems strange, like buying a phone number. You're buying software as a service, but the store model makes it seem like a tangible product. There's a perceived disconnect between what's paid and what's gained.

For Google, the idea of selling Web apps continues to be source of confusion. In the Chromium developer forum, Michael Mahemoff, a member of Google's Chrome developer relations team, notes that the most common question his group confronts is: "What's the difference between a Chrome app and a Web site?"

To clarify this, Mahemoff and Paul Kinlan, a fellow member of the Chrome developer relations team, have published a set of design principals for Chrome apps. Think of them as Google's summary of Apple's Human Interface Guidelines.

"Apps are very popular on mobile devices and mobile marketplaces, but they've had a hard time breaking out on the Web," explain Mahemoff and Kinlan. "User expectations are changing, and people are beginning to demand rich functionality, beautiful presentation, and tightly delivered features from Web sites."

The pair state that Web apps should incorporate these design principals: tight focus, use of the full screen, a rich-engaging experience akin to native desktop apps, visual beauty, and speed.

But defining how Web apps should act goes beyond the apps themselves. Browsers play a part in the Web app user experience too. Google is laying the groundwork for a redefinition of Web apps through the Web app installation mechanism that has been exposed in the developer version of Chrome.

By the end of the year, if Google's message reaches developers, Web apps will begin to look and feel different than mere Web sites. The difference between a Chrome app and a Web site will be obvious. At the moment, however, there's still a lot of work to be done.

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