

FRONT LINES

You Snooze, You Lose?

Mo Marshall & Galen Gruman

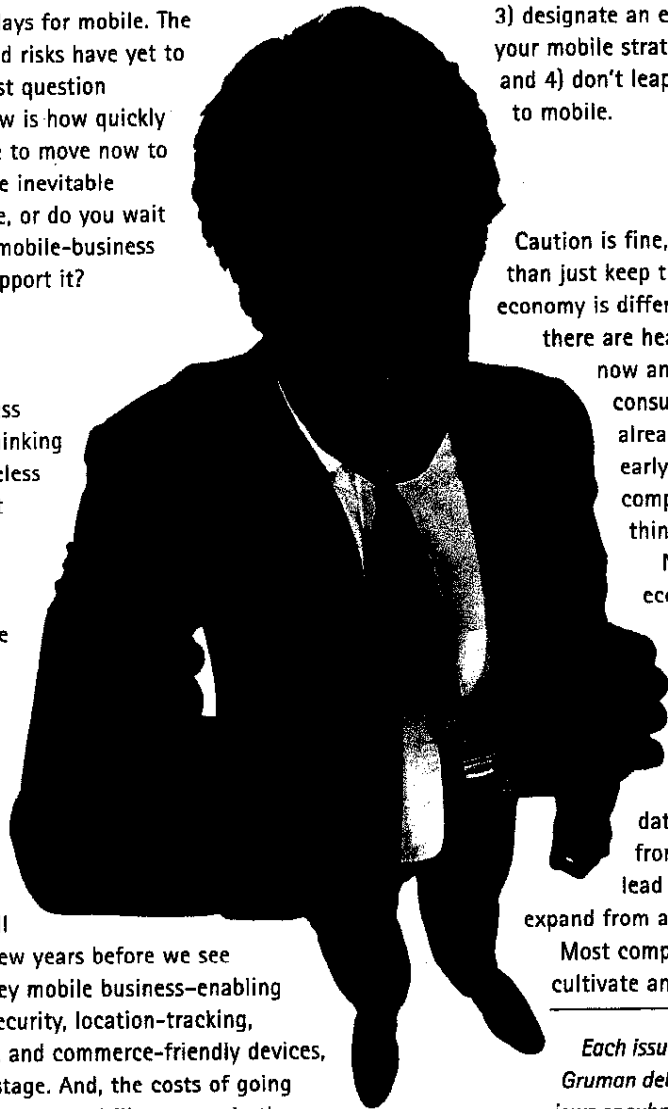
AT ISSUE: It may sound dramatic, and it is: We're standing at the threshold of something big—a whole new economy. From how people find our keys to how they pay a parking meter to how they shop for groceries, mobile wireless data promises to fundamentally alter the way how people interact and transact.

These are still early days for mobile. The biggest opportunities and risks have yet to be taken. And the biggest question businesses face right now is how quickly to move in: Do you have to move now to avoid being buried in the inevitable push-and-shove to come, or do you wait until you have a viable mobile-business plan and a market to support it?

Mo says:



Every business should be thinking about a wireless strategy, but (unless, of course, you're a well-funded mobile-specific startup) rushing to piece together some kind of mobile offering just to keep up with the Joneses is a bad idea. This isn't the Web in 1998; this market is only just getting started: Consumer interest in mobile is still low, and it could be a few years before we see widespread adoption. Key mobile business-enabling technologies, such as security, location-tracking, support for multimedia, and commerce-friendly devices, are still in the toddler stage. And, the costs of going mobile are nothing to sneeze at: It'll cost you in the ballpark of half a mill just to take your informational content mobile;



add commerce capabilities and portal partnership costs, and you're talking about a significant investment.

If you have a viable plan — one that is tailored to the unique opportunities and demands of mobile — then make this investment.

Otherwise, 1) keep your ear to the ground; 2) absorb as much as you can about the technologies, users, and players in this market; 3) designate an executive sponsor in your organization to lead up your mobile strategizing efforts and feel out possible partnerships; and 4) don't leap until you have a business model tailored uniquely to mobile.

Galen says:

Caution is fine, but most companies should do more than just keep their toes in the water. The mobile economy is different than the Internet economy, in that there are healthy businesses in Europe and Japan now and there is an infrastructure and basic consumer adoption of mobile technology in the U.S. already. It's not like the confusing, let's-try-anything early days of the Internet economy where many companies wisely waited to see if that was a fad and for things to sort out.

Now is a great time to stake your claim in the mobile economy. Sure, there's much to be sorted out, especially in the U.S., but those businesses that identify a niche area that dovetails with their existing strengths should jump in now. Leverage your existing business into one of the micro mobile economies now forming, such as messaging, location-oriented services, or remote enterprise data exchange. The larger mobile economy will grow from these micro economies, and the companies that lead now in these niches will have a natural platform to expand from as the market grows.

Most companies shouldn't bet the farm, but they should cultivate an acre or two of a mobile product.

Each issue, Editor-in-Chief Mo Marshall and Executive Editor Galen Gruman debate a key question facing mobile strategists. Send us your views or submit a question by emailing us at editors@mbizcentral.com. Letters may be edited for length, clarity, and style.