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Mobile devices: Meet the persuader in your pocket

BY MARIA JOSÉ VIÑAS

For most of us, a mobile phone is an instrument to talk with other people. But for B. J. Fogg, it is a means to change people's beliefs and behaviors. Fogg, who directs the Stanford Persuasive Technology Lab at the Center for the Study of Language and Information, says that in a decade, mobile phones and other portable devices like personal digital assistants (PDAs) will become a more important platform for persuasion than television is right now.

Fogg organized the first Mobile Persuasion Conference, held Feb. 2 in Tresidder Memorial Union. The event attracted about 260 attendees from academia and industry. At the conference, eight panels covered the potential of mobile persuasion in different fields, such as personal coaching, health promotion and marketing.

Computers, cell phones and persuasion

Fogg is a psychologist who came to Stanford as a graduate student in 1993 to do research on how computers could change people's viewpoints and actions. His thesis was titled "Charismatic Computers." In 1998 he founded the Persuasive Technology Lab, which he recalls started "in a very small way: I was meeting regularly with students but without a physical space." The lab's scholars studied computers and persuasion, initially focusing on what makes websites credible.

About three years ago, Fogg says, he realized that "mobile phones are also a special kind of computer, and a very interesting type when it comes to persuasion." He started studying how mobile devices can be used to change people's behaviors and beliefs. His lab got a grant from the National Science Foundation in 2005 to do further research on mobile persuasion and most of its work is now focused in this topic. The lab members do not consult for outside clients. "We will sometimes do mutual projects, but we like the freedom of deciding what we want to do research on," Fogg explains. He has eight students in his lab, mostly from social sciences.

What enables cell phones and other mobile devices to be so effective in persuading people, Fogg says, is that they travel with us all the time. "It has to be a device you can carry with you without inconveniencing yourself—something like a laptop is portable, but not mobile," Fogg explains. "You can't really carry your laptop with you anywhere, whereas a mobile phone you can put it in your pocket and forget it's there."

Besides, Fogg adds, the device has to be interactive to be able to persuade. It is desirable for the gadget to connect with the Internet, he says.

"Because mobile devices are with us all the time, it's such a tight relationship that it's very much like a marriage," Fogg says. "In fact, you probably spend more time with your mobile phone than with your marriage partner."

Fogg believes people more and more are seeing their cell phones and PDAs as an extension of their bodies and as instruments to help them achieve their goals. That means companies that in the near future will want to advertise on mobile devices will have to be careful about the kind of approach they make to potential costumers.

"When you go to some website and they have pop-up windows and things that annoy you, maybe you will never go back," Fogg says. The same happens with advertisements on mobile devices: They cannot be annoying. They have to elicit a positive interaction.

"If a sales person comes to your home, they're going to need to act differently than if it's you who is going to the store," he says. "The mobile phone, like your home, is much more personal. A sales message in that context needs to be much more carefully targeted and in some ways more polite."

A personal trainer in your phone

Mobile persuasion "is not just about ads on mobile phones," Fogg says. "It touches many fields, from marketing and advertising to health, to education, personal coaching and so on. In fact, the uses for health are probably the most interesting right now." Applications include weight loss and safer sex practices.

The use of mobile persuasion in health improvement and education was widely discussed during the mobile persuasion conference. A company called myFoodPhone Nutrition Inc. presented a mobile health application service designed for camera phones, to help consumers modify their eating habits. The users of this service take pictures of their meals with their cell phones to build an online picture food journal, and a team of nutrition coaches and advisers analyzes this food journal and provides feedback once a week via the service's website, which can be accessed through the cell phone.

Sebastien Tanguay, the general manager of myFoodPhone, explained that personalized feedback is the key for success in mobile persuasion. Other panelists highlighted the importance of users setting their own goals, which have to be realistic and specific, and the need for mobile persuaders to provide praise when users are getting close to their goals.

Mobile persuasion also has been used to modify sexual behavior. The nonprofit organization Internet Sexuality Information Services uses mobile phones for educational campaigns. For example, the organization, based in San Francisco, runs a project called SexINFO, a sexual health program for youth that provides information via cell phone text messages. The campaign was launched in April 2006 and received 4,500 unique inquiries during the first six months. The top inquiries were about what to do if a condom breaks, how to find out about sexually transmitted diseases and what are the options for a girl who suspects she is pregnant. Deb Levine, the executive director of Internet Sexuality Information Services, attributed the success of this campaign to the fact that young people consider text messages to be accessible, affordable and private. She also emphasized the importance of users initiating the service, which allows them to feel in control of the situation.

Challenges in mobile persuasion

According to Fogg, examples like myFoodPhone and SexINFO prove that mobile persuasion can improve people's lives. But a barrier slows the spread of mobile persuasion in the United States—the lack of cooperation between mobile carriers.

"One of the really big problems is that you can make an application for a mobile phone, but then it's difficult to get it distributed," Fogg says. "It's difficult to get the carriers to cooperate. Even when people want to install the application on the mobile phone, it's quite difficult right now."