Pelikan’s Antidisambiguation — On the Legitimization of “Mobile”

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No doubt about it, these are heady times! Lo, we have lived to see the days in which eBook readers, and now, small-form factor tablet computers, have been “legitimized.”

So this summer, as we all head of to our many and various professional conferences of choice, we will find compelling evidence of this legitimacy in at least three ways.

1. We will see the devices everywhere, indeed, competing devices, some now mainstream, some in the process of adoption, and some flourished with the practiced nonchalance of the first adopters of the Newest Things.

2. We will see academic and professional presentations on conference programs breathlessly tackling the challenges of providing services to, or the opportunities to address the challenges of, or best of all, the pedagogical implications of (enter device type here).

3. We will be inundated on the vendors’ display floor at the conferences by a dazzling display of wares, hard and soft, from vendors as well-known as your least-favorite relatives-by-marriage, some new and trustworthy as a teenaged suitor.

The message delivered, across the board, will be “The Long-Awaited Future has Arrived! Don’t get Left Behind! Better Buy Now!”

So Deans, Department Heads, and Supervisors will arrive home ready to demand answers to the question, “What are we doing about (enter device type here)?”

And junior members, aspirants, and supplicants will arrive home ready to ask the Dickensian question, “Please, Sir (or Madam), may I do something about (enter device type here)?”

And all because Amazon legitimized eBooks and Apple legitimized tablets!

Dear readers (both of you!), this is nothing so much as a combination of saying that a leading luggage company legitimized air travel, and that the Yellow Pages legitimized the telephone.

Let’s see — how far back should we go? Well, the Babylonians impressed cuneiform figures into clay tablets, some of which, no doubt, were of convenient size. But perhaps that’s too much of a stretch, even for Antidisambiguation! We must treat the real questions at hand with The Gravitas They Deserve.

All of these devices center, fundamentally, on the portability of information, and in that sense, differ in no great degree from their more technologically primitive forebears, the paperback book and the clipboard. The World Wide Web was created in 1994 and then just sat there, despite endless home page redesigns. To this day, many, many Web sites offering access to essential services are still entirely weighed down with large bodies of text containing tiny links amidst huge images; all mired down in fixed-width pages, devoid of the readily-available means to discover what sort of browser is trying to access them, and then adapting flexibly to accommodate the presentation — in other words, a whole lot of Websites are essentially useless for mobile devices. Warnings about the strategic need to de-couple content from presentation stretch back into the 1990s. Many organizations are struggling only now to climb on board the mobility bandwagon — and climbing onto a moving passenger train ain’t easy!

Meanwhile, the customers left long ago. As soon as we had computers the size of sewing machines, and at the same time, we already had...