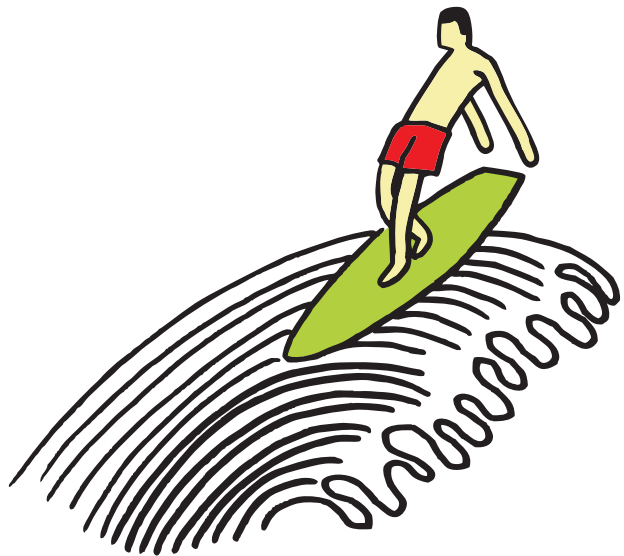

Smoothing the on-ramp: The importance of 'Open ID'



One of the greatest turn-offs for customers arriving at a website for the first time is the sign-up form. Not only are we required to re-submit our personal details for each and every website but we also have to come up with a new password for each one. If you're like us you probably end up using one of several key passwords that you've applied for multiple sites. It's a pain and it's the one of the biggest barriers to overcome in the customer conversion funnel.

What's more, every time you return to a website that you're registered for, it's another hurdle to remember your username and password to sign-in. If you can't remember your security details you'll probably use the forgotten password facility (*if there is one*) and need to wait for the details to arrive in your inbox before you can get on with what you were planning to do originally.

Even sites like those developed by us, that require an email address as a username don't solve the problem because many customers have multiple email addresses and often cannot recollect which email address they used when signing up initially.

For customers this all comes down to too many usernames, too many passwords and too many forms! However, there may be a solution to these barriers: Open ID.

The idea of a Single Sign On (SSO) has been around for some time, for example, you may recollect the Microsoft 'Passport' service. However, these 'proprietor-generated' attempts have failed (*and will continue to fail*) because not everyone can accept them, as the question is always 'what if they turn out to be bad guys?' Even those businesses that today have a reputation for being nice may one day become 'evil'.

Open ID solves this because it does not have a single point of control.

So what is it?

Well basically it means that you have a URL as your identity - i.e. <http://chrisjohns.livejournal.com/> What makes it work is that it's decentralised and you pick who you want to manage your identity.

Open ID means that when you visit a site which allows you to sign on using your Open ID URL, you don't need to go through the shenanigans of the sign-up form and creating a new account. With some good coding, the website that you're trying to sign-up for can exchange information with your Open ID URL and with your acceptance the registration form can pull in your details without you having to retype them. A benefit for customers is that websites that allow you to sign-on with your Open ID will be able to have your up-to-date details

without the hassle of you having to re-type everything. Additionally customers do not have to have a single Open ID account and can have multiple URLs if they so wish and can easily move between IDs.

Other benefits of Open ID are that accounts can be pre-approved by website owners, that people will create accounts for applications that they previously wouldn't have bothered with and that corporate users can extend it to use behind a firewall. Similarly it's possible to create 'white lists' of good Open IDs that can be immediately given access to an application - so for example all members of a particular cricket club could be immediately accepted with their white list Open ID.

Of course there are a few downsides! There are several areas of security that need attention such as concerns over phishing (*the term coined by hackers who imitate legitimate companies in emails to entice people to share passwords or credit card numbers*), server downtime and privacy.

However, these issues are resolvable and we feel that the benefits of Open ID for both customers and website owners are so apparent that there will be a significant take-up of the approach by both sides over the next few months. Major backers such as Bill Gates, AOL, Digg and Symantec are all indicators that Open ID is entering the mainstream.

It's very easy to get an Open ID, and there are many sites that currently offer the ability to create and manage Open ID URLs. These include sixapart.com, MyOpenID.com, AOL and several others, most of which offer a free entry-level service. Our personal favourite is www.freeyourid.com/

In conclusion

It's early days for Open ID but its future is bright because it allows the customer to control their online identity whilst at the same time making it easier for website owners to get you to sign-up and have your up-to-date details. By helping out both sides of the deal and by not being owned by a possibly 'evil' company, the approach is likely to become the standard and therefore usage is set to be huge.

You can find out more information regarding Open ID by visiting <http://openid.net/>

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