Next-Generation Mobile Apps – 7 Critical Success Factors

Introduction

There are literally millions of apps being downloaded each day. Many apps are highly engaging – they are fun, easy to use, cool. However, it's the apps that are highly engaging and highly useful that keep people coming back again and again. The next wave of mobile apps goes beyond the "brochure-ware" apps that have proliferated on the app stores. These next-generation apps – those that are built as real-time extensions of organizations' enterprise systems – will be ones that deliver real value for businesses with high engagement and utility for users.

This whitepaper explores various considerations for creating successful, long-living mobile apps that deliver business value. It covers a discussion of 7 factors that need to be considered when looking to develop – or improve upon – an app:

- Optimize your app for the best user experience possible
- Develop for scale
- Build with the future in mind
- Deliver real business value
- Extend the use and reach of your enterprise systems
- Protect your brand
- Choose the right technical partner

Mobile marketing is still the new kid on the block. Some marketers have tried a variety of mobile tactics and found success. Others remain on the sidelines. Spending on mobile initiatives barely registers, if at all, in many corporate advertising budgets. But mounting evidence points to a broadening awareness that mobile will soon become a necessary way to engage with customers and prospects.

ABI Research 2010: Mobile Marketing Strategies: Is Your Brand Ready to Engage Mobile Consumers?

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The evolving mobile landscape

The number and popularity of mobile apps today are exploding. Headlines and statistics abound. And this trend shows no sign of stopping.

Apps are set to become even more popular as the penetration of smartphones continues to rise, interactive devices like the iPad™ take hold, and powerful players like Google® make inroads into the mobile space.

Behaviours are changing as well. As Figure 1 shows, in the next few years more users are predicted to use their mobile devices than their PCs to access the Internet. Figure 2 illustrates the unprecedented uptake in mobile usage, signaling a significant shift in how media today are consumed.

According to ABI Research, consumers downloaded 2.4 billion applications from app stores in 2009. They predict the download rate will accelerate over the next few years until in 2013 where app downloads will peak at just below seven billion.

Source: ABI Research May 6, 2010

Figure 1: Smartphones are set to surpass PCs by 2012

Gartner forecasts that increasing demand will help propel smartphone sales past personal computer sales by 2012.
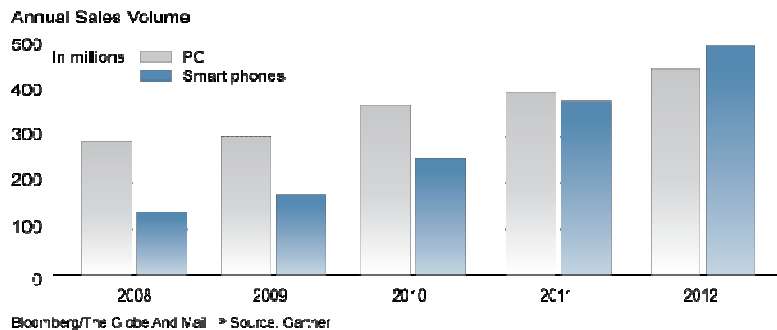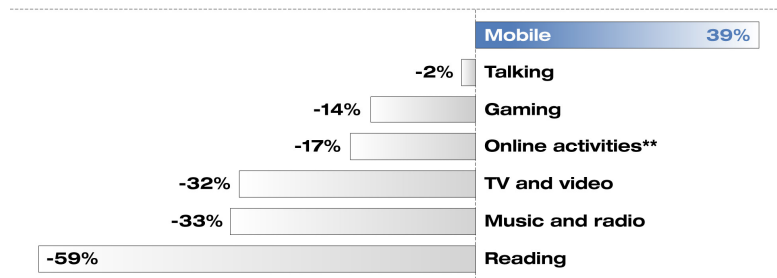

Annual Sales Volume
In millions
PC
Smart phones

Bloomberg/The Globe And Mail • Source: Gartner

Figure 2: Mobile usage is dramatically increasing

Change in Time Spent per Day with Select Media According to US Consumers, 2009 (% change*)

Mobile	39%
-2%	Talking
-14%	Gaming
-17%	Online activities**
-32%	TV and video
-33%	Music and radio
-59%	Reading

Source: eMarketer.com April 14, 2010

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Not surprisingly, companies around the world are recognizing the potential for mobile apps to drive revenue, engage their customers, lower costs, increase productivity and keep their brand top-of-mind.

But not all mobile apps are created equal.

Apps range from simple, static ones to those that deliver a sophisticated and highly interactive experience for users.

Many of the apps that initially flooded the app stores were fun and engaging, but really weren't viewed by most companies as a significant and credible channel. Today, a new wave of apps is gaining traction in the market – next-generation apps that deliver not only an exceptional user experience, but also highly useful services. These apps provide relevant information in a personalized, engaging way and companies are starting to take them seriously as a viable new channel for doing business.

Whether your app is targeted at consumers to drive revenue or it's for use within your enterprise to manage your workforce and provide mobile access to your enterprise systems to boost productivity, your app needs to deliver high utility.

"Sticky" services keep people coming back again and again. A key element of sticky, highly useful services is the ability of the app to tap into the back-end systems of your organization to extend your enterprise capabilities to the mobile.

Below are key factors to consider to ensure that any app you build delivers a strong user experience to ensure you get the most out of your spend on mobile app development.

1. Optimize your app for the best user experience possible

One million iPads were sold within 28 days of launch. This unprecedented demand for new technology has real implications for companies as they determine their strategy for applications.

The iPhone®, iPad touch®, Blackberry®, Android® devices, iPad and other tablets all deliver vastly different experiences. Because they can be accessed anytime, anywhere – not just at the office or home – and they have a small screen size, voice, video, camera, location and touch screen functionalities; the experience is fundamentally different from a PC.

Figure 3. Sticky apps that deliver a strong ROI require high utility and high engagement.

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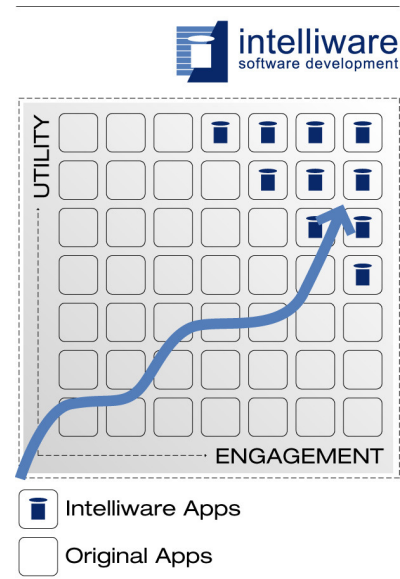
These characteristics along with user demographics and your business objectives need to be taken into account from the outset so you have a clear strategy and plan for each device.

Device Attributes

▸▸ **Form factor:** An app needs to be built for the specific device. This sounds obvious and straightforward but it has deeper implications for how an app is built. For example, the screen size and ease use of the keyboard have to be taken into consideration when presenting information and determining the amount of interaction required by the user to access that information.

Since the iPhone experience is different from the Android or Blackberry you may need separate app executions for each device. Further, new devices like the iPad are set to be the next wave of game-changing technology. As you map out your mobile app development plans, you should keep all these devices and platforms in mind.

▸▸ **Device capabilities:** Another consideration related to the form factor is the actual capabilities of the device. To ensure your app delivers a truly optimized user experience, your developer needs to have a deep and thorough understanding of all the components, capabilities and standards of the device.

The app must be built in a way that the device capabilities used add value to the experience. For example, there are appropriate times to use the certain features and other times when it could detract from the optimal user experience. A swipe gesture from left to right on the iPhone generally means "delete". Using this gesture in another manner may confuse the user. Other functions may have implications on battery life, latency, or the users' data charges.

▸▸ **Performance:** When people are on the go, they want information to be accessible and presented in a vastly different way than when they are connected to a PC. Information has to load quickly, be easy to read on a small screen, display exactly what they're looking for and be actionable with the tap of the screen or the press of a button. To ensure your app delivers the most performant experience, there needs to be a well thought out strategy for what information you want to deliver, where it will come from and how it should be presented. Then these capabilities can be designed and developed so the user experience meets these objectives.

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Creative approach & usability

A mobile app is yet another way to showcase your brand.

The user experience should reflect all aspects of your brand personality – the look and feel, the tone and manner in which you communicate. From a creative perspective, good app design takes into account not only your branding standards, but also the form factor of the device, strong technical design and usability.

From a usability perspective, you cannot assume that what works on the PC will translate well to the mobile. Replicating functions on your website should be assessed and potentially re-engineered so that they provide an optimal experience on the smartphone.

2. Develop for scale

As you plan and build your app, you may not know what the uptake will be.

For some companies, scale may not be an issue. For example, a company may develop an app for its own workforce – to give employees access to information they need while they are on the road, to enable staff to share information, or to give employers tools to manage a mobile workforce. In this case, the app may have a relatively defined and predictable user group.

However, apps are targeted at a broader consumer audience have a virtually limitless number of prospective users. An app must be scalable – delivering a consistent experience for 500, 5000 or 1 million users – without sacrificing speed or overall performance.

Building an app that is scalable to large numbers of users can be a complex task. Ensuring some technical decisions are made up-front will save significant time, resources and frustration later on.

3. Build with the future in mind

When you launch your app, you will likely have plans for future improvements. More capabilities, better services, maybe a premium version of your app that you plan to monetize.

If your app isn't designed and built with this in mind, you could be faced with having to do a complete overhaul of your app. A proven methodology that ensures the underlying foundation of the app is optimized in every way for the audience, is scalable, and is built intelligently will enable new functionality to be added quickly and cost-effectively without re-engineering the base app.

4. Deliver real business value

A mobile app shouldn't be an afterthought. A well thought out and executed app that delivers useful services will keep people coming back to use it again and again. In this way, long-term ROI is achievable with the right strategy and technical partner.

Since mobile is a channel for doing business, it should be held to similar key performance indicators as your other channels. Some ways mobile can deliver a long-term return on investment include:

- Driving sales
- Increasing customer loyalty through engagement
- Building or enriching your community
- Reaching new customers
- Extending your brand
- Complementing your existing marketing activities
- Increasing customer satisfaction through self service
- Reducing your cost to serve through self service, mobile commerce

5. Extend the use and reach of your enterprise systems

For a branded app to have maximum business value and customer uptake, it needs to be useful. Depending upon your business, a way to accomplish this is to build your mobile app so that it integrates with your enterprise data and systems.

By connecting into your back-end systems, the app becomes an extension of your core business. This enables you to deliver all the services and provide the information your customers need in a highly accessible manner.

Keep in mind, there are implications associated with connecting to your enterprise data and systems. You need to ensure your developer has strong technical expertise working with both legacy systems as well as new technologies.

"I think we've only scratched the surface of what's possible in using the mobile channel to drive increased consumer engagement and long term brand loyalty."

Andrew Lipsman, comScore

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Security, performance, reliability and the need to minimize disruption to your on-going operations must be considered.

Using local versus remote access to data

Do you need real-time access to your entire database or will a snapshot be adequate? How quickly can you access this data? In order to have maximum performance, the technological foundation for your app must be strong. To make an app fast – consistently fast – requires an assessment of the database behind the app. It's crucial to determine the best way for the app to query that database to perform at an optimal level. Otherwise, what might otherwise be a highly useful app will see a sharp drop-off in usage, thereby limiting the value of the mobile channel for your organization.

6. Protect your brand

Companies make significant investments in their brands. And, they put resources and measures in place to protect that brand – investments in trademarks, terms of use for logos, branding guidelines, and more. However, in the mobile app space, there are a growing number of situations where companies are losing this battle. Apps are being developed by third parties to either provide an app where one doesn't exist or to create an app that's better than the "official" one. And, these third parties may even be generating revenues from these apps.

While these "unofficial" apps on the surface may appear to deliver value for you, by driving traffic to your stores, increasing sales, promoting your services – they could harm your brand. A customer may believe their poor experience, out of date or inaccurate information, inconsistent branding standards are a reflection of you. Or, if they know the app is from a third party, they may view you as a lagging brand, since someone else thought of the app, not you.

"Research has repeatedly shown that premium brands that invest in marketing and promotion activities aimed at maintaining buying at preferred levels are able to minimize short-term erosion of share to less expensive brands."

Mobile Commerce Daily, May 2010

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Figure 4. Official corporate apps found on the App Store with corresponding examples from unofficial competitors.

myStarbucks Canada

The Home Depot

BRAND EROSION

BRAND EROSION

1. Starbucks Locator

1. Home Depot

2. Go Grande – Find your nearest Starbucks

2. Home Depot Locator

3. CoffeeShake – Starbucks Edition

4. Espresso Pro – Your Ordering Assistant for Starbucks® Coffee

5. Coffee Spot Lite – The Coffee Finder to Find Starbucks Coffee

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Choose the right technical partner

Static apps can be done quickly and easily by a myriad of people. However, if you want to extend your enterprise-class product or service or create a new channel, you need to design these applications with the considerations you would have for any enterprise system or software build.

It's important to understand your vendor– beyond how many developers they have, how many years they've been in business and what types of projects they have worked on. You should look for a technical partner who has made substantial and on-going investments in R&D. As well, they should have a proven record of using and understanding not only new technologies, but also enterprise and legacy systems so they understand the implications of your current IT environment for the build of your mobile app.

You need to be able to trust and rely on your vendor to be able to handle the complex development required to link into your enterprise systems – without impacting on-going operations or compromising the security and privacy of your data.

Conclusion

In many cases, it's the decisions you make today around the usability and technical architecture of your app that will make it a successful business driver for you in the future. These two factors are tightly connected – considering only one in isolation could set you up for considerable challenge in the future.

Since these decisions are fundamental to the quality of the user experience, it is vitally important to ensure you choose a technology partner who understands not only mobile, but also usability, strategic and future-proof design, branding and your business and IT framework. All are key elements for a successful app build. Making short-sighted decisions regarding key functionality, underlying technology and architecture today can be limiting (and costly) for you tomorrow.

At **Intelliware**, we understand application development. We've been in business for over 20 years and have a proven track-record in building bullet-proof, high quality and high volume enterprise solutions. We are the recognized experts in delivering iterative applications using Agile methodology.

We take our mobile practice seriously and have invested in and built a mobile application platform using best-practices and leading edge technology. We've made significant investments into R&D and continue to do so. We can get you to market quickly with a best-in-class mobile app.

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