COLUMNS

How to build a successful Apple Watch app

July 14, 2015

Christian Gaiser is founder/CEO of Axel Springer SE's Bonial.com Group

By Christian Gaiser

With the watch industry generating more than $60 billion in sales in 2013, Apple and application developers are looking to revolutionize how watches operate with Apple Watch.

While expectations vary over how it will sell, one analyst predicts that 20 million of the Apple Watches will be snapped up by year-end, making it the most popular smartwatch ever.

And like the iPhone was initially, the Apple Watch will be defined less by externals and more by apps it can carry, creating a unique opportunity for developers.

The difficulty, however, lies in app development, with Apple Watch being the first entirely new platform from Cupertino since the iPhone debuted in 2007.

Additionally thanks to the new size conventions of the device, developers now have to rethink more traditional development norms to truly take advantage of the device.

With that in mind, here are the four keys to successfully develop an Apple Watch app:

1. Context is crucial. Apple Watch users will not be tethered to their watches. They will not engage with the watch face for long periods at a time.

Apple has, in fact, urged developers to design their apps to be used for no longer than 10 seconds at a time. That is a far cry from designing an app for an iPhone where users seemingly cannot keep their eyes off their device.

Instead, interactions will be casual and quick a speedy email check, a flight departure confirmation, a meeting date change.

The key: Do not try to replicate the full feature list from your iPhone app on Apple Watch. Be selective. That means omitting unessential features and including only the functionality that work best within the context of the Watch experience.

A developer has to adjust for an interaction that will be extremely fast and superficial within a few square inches, so distilling the user experience and reducing information to the bare minimum is important.

2. Reduced friction. Compared to a smartphone app, a wrist-based device is inherently easier to interact with.

With the Apple Watch, suddenly the friction of a pocket device is gone. Now consumers do not have to take out an iPhone, unlock it and open an app. Everything is easily accessible for a seamless user experience.

For developers, it is important to carry that natural frictionless through to the user interface (UI) and your in-app navigation.

The key: Developers need to understand that the full user experience cannot be replicated on an Apple Watch. Refine the UI to the bare minimum to match the device's simplicity.

The Apple Watch is about convenience and apps need to reflect that, not just in features, but in presentation and flow.

You also have to account for the screen size or lack thereof making a stripped-down interface even more of a requirement for navigation and use.

3. IPhone-dependent. Since the Apple Watch Software Development Kit (SDK) is embedded in the iPhone app SDK, developers need to account for the interdependencies.

Today's Apple Watch is nothing without an iPhone, which includes all the relevant code, while Apple Watch apps contain only the application resources and UI display.

The developer needs to recognize that the product and the functionality allowed will evolve over time, so keep that in mind as you consider strategies moving forward.

The key: Because of the symbiotic relationship between the two devices, you need to micromanage and plan your rollout meticulously.

Especially among bigger mobile companies with longer release cycles, this will have a considerable effect on timing.

Also, establish a long-term plan for additional use cases and app functionality.

Consider all possible variations and extensions so you can easily make changes in upcoming app updates.

4. Change the paradigm. Typically, with apps a brand wants to keep people engaged as long as possible. With the Apple Watch, the reverse is true. You want to get people in and out of the app as quickly as possible.

That is what makes an Apple Watch app experience successful. Those using Apple Watch do not want to scroll, read beyond a few words, or tap multiple times on the small watch face. They might do this initially, having just purchased a new device, but that desire will wane quickly.

The key: Developing an app for Apple Watch forces you to think differently.

With Apple Watch, you are fundamentally redefining what success has typically meant.

Change your mindset and put yourself in the user's head. You will need to reorient your thinking, coding and design skills.

Remember, the goal is making Apple Watch apps simple and convenient.

Christian Gaiser is founder/CEO of Axel Springer SE's Bonial.com Group, Berlin, Germany. Reach him at cwg@retale.com.