

COLUMNS

9 tips for designing smart watch apps

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Smart watches offer a promising new customer touch point for retailers and financial services companies, but any successful effort to use them in your business will depend strongly on having a laser focus on the simplicity and utility of your application's design.

Smart watches such as the Apple Watch or Motorola's Moto 360 are growing in use, although they have a long way to go before they catch up to the penetration level of smartphones.

Still, International Data Corporation (IDC) recently forecast 34.3 million smart watches will ship in 2016, a number it estimates will grow to 88.3 million by 2019, as consumers become more comfortable with the technology.

Here are a few things to keep in mind when creating apps for smart watches:

Ergonomics: Just because a watch does not have to be retrieved from a pocket or bag does not mean it is easier to use. Users have to lift their arm and rotate their wrist just to view a watch.

If the user has to interact with an app, she has to reach across her body with her other arm. These can be tiring physical movements if they have to be done for more than a few seconds.

When designing apps for smart watches, you have to test them on real devices to see what is the physical cost of any given interaction.

Follow platform design guidelines: The creators of Android Wear and Apple's watchOS have well-documented user interface and interaction design patterns.

Remember your goal is to have a well-functioning and easy-to-use app, so help your users by leveraging design and interaction conventions that they already recognize.

Gestures: You should strive to use simple and memorable gestures in smart watch apps. Lean heavily on the gestures already built into the watch's operating system since users will be familiar with these from other apps.

While creating new and novel gestures can make an app more engaging on a smartphone, a watch's form factor requires simplicity and memorability more than anything else.

Embrace error recovery: If your app allows users to delete something, make sure there is an easy way for them to recover from any mistakes.

It is too easy to accidentally brush a watch screen and delete an alert that the user may really need.

The undo function in Google's Gmail for desktop and smartphones is a good example of allowing users to quickly recover from an error. But you will have to use your judgment in implementing error recovery because too many

cancels are just as bad as none.

Make content scannable: Only display content that can be read and understood in a few seconds.

Content that takes longer to process and act on can trigger some of the ergonomic problems mentioned above.

Consider standalone functionality: If a watch app is paired to a smartphone app that offers features such as redeeming rewards points or making mobile payments, those should be fully supported on the watch app.

Imagine a customer's frustration if she gets a watch alert in a geofenced retail location that tells her that she has to pull out the phone to redeem points, scan coupons or make purchases.

If the only point of an app is to display messages or alerts, display all the content on the watch. Do not tease the user and make her dig out the phone to view the complete message.

As smart watches become more standalone in the future with independent Wi-Fi capabilities or data plans, this approach to feature design will be essential to successful apps.

Do not think of a watch as a small smartphone: While it is important to make watch experiences as complete as possible, do not make the mistake of trying to reproduce all the functionality of your smartphone app on a smaller screen.

Keep your use cases simple and focused. Otherwise, you will just frustrate your users and they may just delete your app.

Be judicious in using alerts: Because most smart watches use vibrations or tones as a primary way of attracting users' attention, be thoughtful in how often you want to alert them.

Some consumers may be OK with getting alerts for every Facebook message they receive, but they may not want that same frequency from your app.

If possible, enable settings that allow the user to control which alerts go to their phone and which ones go to their wrist.

Be cautious with inputs: Filling out forms is bad enough on smartphones, but it is a nightmare on a watch. Limit input to taps, gestures, preset responses and voice input.

For use cases where typing is required, such as logging into a banking app to approve a payment, shift that part of the interaction to the smartphone.

WE ARE JUST at the starting point of the smart watch revolution and will likely learn a lot more about what works and what does not in app design in the years to come.

Hopefully these tips give you a starting point for your exploration of this exciting new device category.

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