

COLUMNS

Mobile Web vs. mobile app: When and why

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By [Tony Long](#)

The world is a big, diverse place where more than 1.7 million species of animals, plants and algae exist, all subject to the same cycle of extinction and evolution that has been taking place over millions of years.

It is with this in mind that we briefly explore the various factors that go into pursuing either a mobile Web strategy or a mobile application strategy.

The reason for this helpful context is that, in spite of what has been published throughout the business press about mobile Web versus mobile apps, and regardless of what we have all read on the various strengths and weaknesses of the different mobile computing platforms, there need not be one final either/or decision.

In fact, depending on the overall strategy, a company can start on one side, and then evolve into the other, or even support both.

All about data

Whether a company elects to build a Web site optimized for mobile or decides to pursue a strategy of creating standalone apps, at the core of the company's objectives are 1) making data and data-related services available to their desired audience, and 2) the experiences they want their audience to have.

Mobile-optimized Web platforms and standalone apps both handle data with about the same degree of efficiency, which is the critical performance requirement.

When it comes to displaying that data as broadly as possible, the mobile Web as it currently exists delivers a key benefit of being as close to write-once-run-anywhere as possible.

The secret sauce behind write-once-run-anywhere is broadly regarded to be HTML5, which offers many new API features that allow developers to create Web experiences that feel more like standalone applications.

Additionally, the rapid rise of enhanced Javascript libraries geared specifically for creating richer user interactions such as jquery mobile, Xui.js and Paul Armstrong's baseJS offer great potential for raising the quality of the mobile Web experience.

Although by definition a more selective route, there are many benefits to pursuing a mobile app strategy: a richer, cleaner user experience can be designed and executed; the device's native functions can be more fully exploited; and the user's choice of devices represents a self-selected list that defines the user and makes it easier for marketers to target.

Getting lost in the app store or on the phone-top are common challenges to the mobile app strategy, but these arguments are the same as those lofted in the early days of the Web concerning whether consumers would remember URLs, and whether a site would become lost among the browser's bookmarks.

Consumers, it seems, have evolved faster than Web developers and marketers thought they could.

Three is the magic number

Coming to a decision between the mobile Web and a standalone app means finding the right balance between three factors: The desired audience and the size of the reach; the type of data or services to be delivered; and the anticipated update requirements.

The desired audience is a deceptive metric, because not all mobile interactions need to be geared toward everyone.

It benefits the marketer to consider the self-selection that goes into a smartphone purchasing decision and to evaluate whether that particular device has a sufficient critical mass of users to make the needle jump for its own brand.

The type of data or services to be delivered drives the decision based on whether the device's native features need to be invoked, and whether the desired data or services exchange between the user and the company should leverage existing transaction systems or be fully customized.

Finally, the frequency of updating the application may work well with a particular strategy of delivering a steady stream of enhancements to the app, versus a scenario where the basic data wrapper the user interface will not be regularly enhanced, or is not anticipated to change often if at all.

Gone fishin'

Opportunities abound for companies to propel their businesses using mobile interactivity.

But because every company is different, each will need to consider factors beyond those outlined above to come to the right decision, such as the existing and planned enterprise data model, the resources needed to support one strategy over the other and the potential ROI.

For a company to choose one avenue over the other should be a function of its near-term strategic objectives as well as the limits or potential of the data infrastructure that would support the effort.

To this end, companies are better off investing in creating a flexible, light data architecture that makes delivering key company services and information outside the firewall easy and cost-effective.

Above all, it is important to keep in mind that mobile computing is still very much in its earliest stages of evolution.

Regardless of which side one leans toward in the mobile Web versus standalone app discussion, nobody can say for sure whether this particular fish will sprout legs, grow wings or both.

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