

COLUMNS

Getting ready for Apple iOS 5: Platform updates and brands

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Apple will this month release the newest and perhaps most anticipated version of its mobile platform: iOS 5. This release promises a variety of enhancements to the user experience that can be activated by application creators to improve their products.

Handling platform updates is not a walk in the park, though. If you are in charge of a mobile app or influence decision-making for a brand considering an app, you need to be aware of how platform updates such as the release of iOS 5 affect your plans.

Keeping mobile apps up-to-date can be challenging, and only through regular maintenance will you avoid user experience pitfalls and effectively leverage new opportunities ahead of your competition.

Effective management of a mobile app in the context of platform updates includes three important aspects: planning for a sustainable release cycle, effectively using the Apple Developer Program and choosing a flexible product roadmap.

1. Plan for a sustainable release cycle

The current mobile app request for proposal (RFP) process often focuses on version 1.0 features and limits the vision for an app to what is offered by the platform. It is important for RFPs to take into consideration the maintenance needed to keep the app updated.

A sustainable release cycle includes planning for regular point releases 1.1, 1.2 and so on and puts you in a position to efficiently respond to regular platform updates.

Point releases allow you to fix bugs that creep past quality assurance processes and demonstrate engagement with your users. These app updates also drive engagement and remind users of the unique value that your app provides.

When you plan your foray into executing on a mobile strategy that includes native apps, you should include budget for follow-on app releases. If you do not continue to update your app, your users may lose interest as its utility is surpassed by substitute applications.

2. Use Apple's Developer Program effectively

As a normal part of improving the platform, Apple makes changes to how apps should be written on iOS. These revisions can break apps that are not updated to reflect changes.

For example, a previous, less efficient way to create a simple table view in an iOS app might be "deprecated," meaning it is no longer advised as a best practice.

Over time, a deprecated function is no longer supported, which can cause your app to behave strangely or not work at all.

Fortunately, Apple offers a way to test your app on a new platform update in advance of its public release to make sure it continues to work as intended.

After Apple has publicly announced a new version of iOS, the company begins "seeding" consecutive closed beta previews.

Public discussion of the iOS beta program is not allowed because of Apple's Developer Program Non-Disclosure Agreement.

However, even if you do not have direct access to the Apple iOS Developer Program, you can stay on top of the beta schedule by carefully following technology blogs such as Apple Insider and Mac Rumors.

Once you know an iOS beta is available, you should ask your QA team to install a copy of the beta on a test device and check to make sure your app runs correctly.

Based on the results, you may also want your development group to re-compile and build your application using the new beta copy of Xcode that is released with each new beta of iOS.

Depending on any issues in your app related to the platform update, you may need to publish an updated version of your app that is fully compatible with iOS 5.

By taking these practical steps in advance of a new platform announcement, you can avoid otherwise unexpected problems reported by users who are among the first to adopt iOS 5.

3. Choose a flexible mobile roadmap

Apple maintains its competitive advantage over other companies by introducing new features in its mobile platform with each update to iOS.

In turn, you need a roadmap that is flexible enough to allow you to react quickly to new platform updates and adapt development plans so that they provide users with the best possible mobile experience.

For example, AirPrint wireless printing was introduced in iOS 4.2. For apps with a major document component, this might have been a valuable feature to include in your development roadmap planning.

iOS 5 introduces AirPlay Mirroring, which allows a litany of new ways to interact with an Apple TV-enabled television from your mobile app.

Whether you are in charge of an entertainment or a product catalog app, the benefits of leveraging this unique new capability could up the game of your mobile product in a big way.

THE POWER AND value of mobile devices is increasing with widespread adoption and relentless innovation from Apple. The only way to keep up with these two trends is to plan for and expect the platform to evolve.

You need to keep a sharp eye on announced changes and leverage blogs or direct access to the Apple Developer Program for iOS to stay on top of changes.

With forward-thinking planning and knowledge of upcoming changes, you will be prepared to implement the new features that can take your product to the next level.

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