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How to boost engagement with mobile apps

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You have developed a killer application the best deal-finding, social-networking, music-streaming, branded mobile app on the market and it is getting a million downloads a month. Success, right?

Not necessarily.

In fact, downloads no longer measure of app success at all. That bus has left the station as apps have proliferated and download metrics and systems have been gamed.

The truth is, most people stop using an app after about a month. Too often an app's novelty wears off after the first interaction.

An unused app offers no channel for ongoing conversations about your brand.

Mobile experts say repeat engagement is the No.1 success factor. App publishers need to design their apps for optimum user experience to keep users coming back.

The brands that are succeeding on mobile take advantage of the unique characteristics of mobile intent, social, interactivity, real-time, location to give users a compelling experience. They use their apps to start conversations and not as brochures or tiny replicas of their Web sites.

Based on our experience working with thousands of the most successful brands on mobile, here are a few tips below for boosting app engagement.

1. Develop your app with the user experience in mind

When building a business case for mobile, be able to explain why your customers will use it in one sentence and how your user will interact with your brand on mobile before you start to design.

Will your customers launch your app for quick information, such as finding a restaurant or a local retail outlet? Will they spend more than five minutes consuming content?

These answers will inform how you design your app for maximum engagement.

Your mobile app must bring intrinsic value to your business. Are you focused on increased customer loyalty? Heightened brand identification?

If so, you want to provide information, encourage feedback and incorporate social elements into your app.

Is your app part of a campaign to support a specific cause?

Create opportunities for your customers to connect with other like-minded individuals to advocate externally and to take action such as making a donation or signing a petition.

Political action apps are leading the industry with engaging apps that incorporate social elements to foster engagement

2. Use push notifications to bring users back to your app

Push notifications are the most effective way to battle app inertia.

A push notification sends a short message to your usersfrom within the app, even when the app is closedthat provides relevant information and consequently reminds customers why they like your app in the first place.

If done right, your customers win too with push. They opt-in to control which push notifications they want to receive and how they would like to be notified, such as via badge update, sound or text/modal alert.

You do not have to contact users every day. In fact, your usage of push should align specifically with the purpose of your app and your usage should depend on user preferences for how and how often they receive notifications.

Some examples:

The dictionary.com app, one of the most successful, sends out push notifications with the word of the day. Users opt-in for push notifications to get thatthe word of the day. So the right amount of push for that app is "daily."

For "breaking news" apps, the right frequency is more subjective. Like network executives, app publishers will make an editorial call. So the right amount of push for that app is "every time there is breaking news."

Users who download a social check-in app are signing up for notifications on the whereabouts and activities of friends. Again, the right amount of push is exactly what the user reasonably expects.

None of these users is signing up for unrelated, unwanted messaging.

Once users opt-in, you need to stick to your end of the bargain and send only messages that contain the compelling content that your users have agreed to accept, and at an acceptable frequency. A misstep on your end could close the door to future engagement with that user.

Users trust you to communicate with them on their terms. Use push notifications successfully and you will have a priceless channel for user engagement. Provide insufficient information, and they will turn you off.

With apps, do not think in the same terms as you think about email or SMS.

Losing an opted-in push user is not just a "-1" to your marketing list. It undermines the utility of your app and, by extension, the power of your brand.

The consequences for losing an app user are far greater, i.e., your app becomes less effective and may not function as intended. Because your app icon lives in your user's hand, you do not want it to serve as a reminder of a poor experience.

3. Understand user behavior

To make your mobile campaign truly successful, you need to figure out the optimal time and method for messaging your users.

You should track which messages prompt the most response, what times of day are most effective for sending messages and which devices or time zones or platforms spur the greatest engagement.

Understanding your user behavior will help you decide how and when to tailor messaging campaigns to specific users or to users meeting certain patterns. This data helps you glean valuable insight to improve your marketing outreach across channels

4. Measure engagement

One of the things that make the mobile medium difficult is its siloed nature. This tends to create problems with analytics and measurement.

While all mobile vendors offer their own flavor of dashboard, many are not integrated into a larger CRM system or measurement tool such as Webtrends or Omniture. This leaves agencies with a handful of stats, but no real insight or understanding of campaign success.

Remember: what gets measured gets funded.

So it is important for agencies to look beyond simple download and opt-in stats and focus on long-term client goals such as customer retention and/or acquisition. It does not matter what it is, it only matters that the deployed mobile tactic tracks to the same goals as the overall campaign.

As you track app usage, pay specific attention to how the rate changes directly after push notifications and compare against dormant time.

As you fine-tune the best practices for your specific app, you will have a better understanding of how your users are responding, even when they are not telling you directly.

If your opt-in rate is going down, you may have a problem. You might be sending messages too frequently, with content that is not compelling or with annoying messages.

HOPEFULLY these tips will help you create compelling app experiences that keep consumers coming back for more.

With iOS5 on the way, push notifications will take center-stage and become a lot more mainstream.

Which means more competition for attention.

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