

COLUMNS

Mobile marketing and the Great Content Delivery Debate

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By [Marilyn Simes](#)

Cue the debate team and break out the notepads because when there are four ways of doing something in this case, delivery of mobile marketing content you can be certain of at least four enthusiastic answers.

Clearly the "Great Content Delivery Debate" continues.

Just a few short years ago, the question for marketers was whether they should bother investing in a mobile strategy carefully tailored to their brand objectives.

Today, that question has been answered with a resounding "yes." Today, the pressing question is, "What's the best route for delivering effective mobile marketing content?"

The answers, as in any healthy debate, are complex and multilayered. Applications, and particularly native apps, currently rule the mobile-delivery roost. But other options which take advantage of the mobile Web's growing capabilities are rising up to challenge native dominance.

So how did apps reach their ascendancy?

There's an app for that and that and that

Since the openings of the iTunes store and the Android Market (now Google Play) in 2003 and 2008, respectively, their combined app offerings have reached nearly 1 million. This spring, app downloads for Apple alone hit nearly 25 billion that is 18 billion more than there are people on Earth.

However, as the iTunes and Android stores march on, it becomes ever more difficult to pick out the best and leave the rest.

As evidenced by a growing body of articles not to mention a simple Google search for "most useless apps" that returns 3.2 million hits the fact of the matter is that many apps are indeed pointless or designed without superior user functionality in mind.

That so many are grumbling about the over-abundance of "useless" apps speaks in my view, at least to the fact that there are still many great apps that serve the programs' original purpose: performing tasks relevant to our lives, and that includes having fun.

That is what is behind apps' current dominance: the mountains of useless apps are kept aloft by a solid base of the how-did-we-ever-get-along-without-them apps that came before.

This is true whether the apps are native, and therefore developed for use within a particular proprietary operating system such as Apple's iOS, or Web-based, wherein the apps download some or all of the software they need to work

from the Web each time they run.

Apps' opening arguments: pros and cons

But whether we are talking about native or Web-based, each has its advantages and drawbacks.

Native apps, while more expensive to create, generally allow developers to provide a faster experience for the user with better graphics.

What is more, many native apps can be used offline and only they can access device features such as a GPS or camera.

But if a developer is creating an app for, say, iOS, it is working in a closed environment controlled by the big A.

The computer giant also garners a considerable cut of any revenue generated by the app.

In fact, Tim Mackenzie, in a May 2012 TechRepublic article, estimates that in a 1,000-app distribution at 99 cents per app, developers will only recoup \$693 versus the true value of \$990, a 30 percent decrease. Higher costs get passed on to both consumers and brands that advertise on apps.

Web apps are less expensive and faster to code and allow developers more freedom. It is also a lot easier for developers to keep updating them in order to remain competitive and they can run on more devices.

Marketers advertising on a Web app save money. But if you cannot get your app into an app store, its mainstream visibility will suffer. The app also will not have access to devices' features.

The challenge for brands looking to market themselves through apps lies in figuring out which of these two related, but ultimately distinct, delivery platforms works best for their brands' specific goals.

However, we are not limited to just two kinds of apps.

Native and Web: Hybrids introduce third-party rebuttal

Today, we have hybrids, apps that are written mostly in open-format code such as HTML5, which has quickly grown in popularity among mobile developers, but incorporating enough native code to allow them to run on the proprietary operating systems.

It is likely we will see a growing market for the versatility of these hybrid apps. But, despite their pre-eminence in the mobile space, apps are not the only way to deliver great and great-looking content.

HTML5 and the mobile Web's evolution: a fourth option

Though it's still evolving, HTML5 looks to be the next big thing in mobile Web developing. But up to now, there has been a lag between the possibilities of the coding language and the capabilities of older mobile browsers which lowers the speed and sharpness of rich media-heavy content.

As mobile browsers catch up to the capabilities of HTML5, it is likely that we'll see a new generation of location-aware mobile Web sites that are less expensive to code yet provide graphics vibrant enough to rival those of native apps.

While ABI Research is predicting that native app downloads will plateau over the next few years as the mobile Web's capabilities evolve, with increasing numbers of companies switching from iOS apps to HTML5 apps, Strategy Analytics forecasts that the rise of HTML5 will lead to an abundance of best-of-both-worlds hybrids but that native apps will continue to rule.

So the jury is still out.

It may be too early to call a winner in the content-delivery debate, but one thing is certain: between native and Web apps, hybrids and mobile Web sites and considering the rise of low-cost mobile devices marketers have never had so many options for reaching so many consumers with the kind of relevant messaging that is likely to turn them into loyal customers. So perhaps a four-way tie, rather than a sole winner, is what is needed?

Think about that for a while.

GIVEN THE SHEER amount of time today's consumers spend looking at the screens in their hands, marketers would do well to carefully consider the costs and benefits of each of these platforms to find which, alone or in combination, best support their particular objectives.

Where Brand A might find a good fit with a hybrid app and an HTML5 mobile Web site, Brand B might decide that a

pair of native apps one for iOS, one for Android will do the trick.

But make no mistake, brands that neglect to explore the potential of all these content-delivery avenues risk falling behind in the never-ending race for coveted consumer mind- and wallet-share. Now think about that.

Marilyn Simes is lead strategist for [Digital Instincts](#), Tuckahoe, NY. Reach her at msimes@digitalinstincts.com.

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