

COLUMNS

What you need to know about HTML5 vs. native apps

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It all started with the ever-popular colloquial phrase, "There's an app for that!"

In our technology-enthused culture, those four simple words have become infused with the constant drive for the latest and greatest in mobile technology. As a digital strategist, with that drive comes the need to choose the best option for developing your mobile application.

With the debate between the HTML5 and native app methodologies raging across the mobile development community, you might be left wondering whether there is a middle ground?

If you are looking to stay competitive in the digital space, are you required to develop two disparate mobile solutions?

The more you read about the debate, it is apparent some companies are heavily invested in one technology versus the other, so those biases play themselves out in each article.

When all is said and done, it can be quite confusing, even to our own group of professional strategists that has made mobile our business since 2005.

In our experience, a great number of our content partners have reached a crossroads with regards to their app development strategy.

While currently leveraging native apps to provide content to their mobile audience, at the same time, they are also exploring the capabilities of HTML5.

Rather than weighing the pros and cons of each methodology, we decided to strategize as to which approach is better suited for various segments looking to distribute content via the mobile platform.

HTML5 vs. native apps: What's the difference?

HTML5 allows one development effort to be used across multiple platforms by combining your digital assets into one template. The final product resides within the mobile Web browser and offers you a one-size solution to fit all devices, phones, tablets and Web.

Many HTML5 app developers feature easy-to-customize CMS software, allowing brands to make alterations on the fly, without worrying about complex coding.

Additionally, advertising generally lives within the mobile browser.

By using HTML5, the experience is kept within the browser for the user, including newer advertising methods such as rich media or pre-roll ad units.

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Native apps, on the other hand, are just that, native to the mobile home screen. When developers build separate templates, specific to each platform, users can then access optimized content and all associated tools in a framework that is device-specific.

Apple and Google present a gatekeeper mentality for app developers looking to publish to the mobile application store. However, this does allow for mass distribution through the mobile marketplace.

Here is a quick breakdown of important features, and how each environment supports them:

Feature HTML5 Native App

Distribution Web App store

Geolocation Yes Yes

Content accessibility Online Online/Offline

Speed Slow Fast

Publishing ability One template Per OS template

Content control Easy Complicated

In the case of some publishers, a hybrid approach offers great flexibility and maximum content distribution.

With many digital properties using HTML5 to build their Web sites, it only makes sense for that same language to frame their mobile Web site.

For those new to mobile, the strategy of using mobile as an extension of their digital brand is an easy transition. Advertising can generally transfer between the two properties and content feeds can easily be integrated.

In addition, this approach allows you to use the publishing tools of HTML5, with the mass distribution of native apps.

Pages can be built using HTML5 that normally live within the Web browser, to be housed in an "app wrapper," providing the proper specifications to be published within the Google Play marketplace or iTunes.

While this might seem like the perfect solution, simply because it looks like an app and acts like an app does not mean it is an app.

A hybrid app operates from a Web browser, meaning it will not run as quickly as a native app and may not take advantage of capabilities found within the latest smartphones.

On the flip side, using an app wrapper to publish an HTML5 Web app does have its advantages.

Being able to cost-effectively create a mobile Web site with HTML5 that can also be coded with an app wrapper allowing it to be submitted into the app store allows brands the opportunity to effectively market their mobile solution.

HTML5 technology continues to improve, giving publishers richer content to integrate.

Critical questions you need to consider

Before embarking down the path of creating a mobile app development strategy, you must consider many factors.

Is it beneficial to use HTML5 for the development of mobile Web sites that reside strictly in the browser while developing device-specific native apps?

By deploying separate technology, are you offering users the best mobile experience that will encourage them to revisit your brand?

Are your advertisers given the most options, which fully optimize device screens, reach their target audience, and initiate a call-to-action?

Are you looking to engage with your users via push alerts and direct messaging, while combining social media tools and user-submitted content such as photos and videos?

As a content provider, do photo galleries and videos complement your basic text?

Does the use of rich media components such as live video, radio streaming, social media sharing tools, rich-media advertising and pre-roll video affect your decision-making process when developing a proper mobile strategy?

The short answer to these questions yes.

By implementing a mobile-first strategy, the issues are more complicated beyond just deciding whether to develop within HTML5 or native apps.

To fully provide a complete mobile solution to users, you must consider all forms of media that can integrate.

Ten years ago, the idea of having scheduled broadcasts streaming online seemed like a foreign idea.

Present day, streaming has gone from digital to mobile, with both on-demand and live options.

The evolving technology landscape requires a vigilant mobile solution that allows for flexibility and continuous improvements.

Things to think about for established brands

If you are an established brand looking to set yourself up for success in the mobile marketplace, you are probably asking yourself many of the same questions an entry-level brand would ask.

For instance, how do we target our audience? With many options to choose from, what is the best method of content distribution for us?

Delta Airlines, for example, provides users with a native app to store flight information, mark parking spaces, and generate mobile boarding passes.

Knowing that airline travel can change frequently, Delta uses the native environment to ensure that travelers are kept updated in a zero-lag-time environment.

Things to think about for an entry-level brand

If you are new to mobile, you may wonder, do we wade into the waters or dive right in?

Like an established brand, you may wonder how to connect with the most users?

When HootSuite decided to venture into mobile, HTML5 became the best-fitted solution for it. Centered around Twitter, it was a seamless fit for HootSuite to use HTML5 to push and pull tweets.

As users are able to set customized feeds and tweet reminders, HootSuite looked to have the same easy customizable interface and could achieve that through HTML5.

By keeping a consistent look across multiple platforms, HootSuite understands its users need a seamless and recognizable solution for all devices.

Jockeying for position

HTML5 and native apps are buzzwords that are jockeying for position in the mobile development environment.

Whether working with a specific development platform or a hybrid approach, it is important to consider all factors when creating your mobile strategy.

Either way, the mobile environment lends itself to be tried-tested, and re-tested, and more than likely tested some more as consumer behavior reacts to evolving technology.

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