

COLUMNS

Leading retailer apps for holiday shopping 2010: What luxury brands can learn

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By [Al Kalman](#)

Almost one year ago we reviewed some of the [top retailers' mobile applications](#). Now with holiday season here once more, it is time for a second look at those brands, along with a few others.

Overall, the applications are looking a lot alike, with many of the updates coming just in time for the 2010 shopping season.

Home Depot

It was not until Halloween when Home Depot got its update working on the latest iPhone software.

Before that, each time I tried launching the application it would immediately crash.

A working version is finally up and the changes are most welcome.

Home Depot now has full shopping capabilities, different from the previous version, which was merely a brochure.

Both shopping by category, as well as through keyword search are offered front and center on the home screen.

The navigation on the bottom has a horizontal scroll a questionable choice as is the order of icons.

For example, would Home Depot not prefer to have its store locator visible over the video section or the "nut & bolt finder" tool?

Overall, the application was found to be a little slow, so you may want to do most of your shopping in a Wi-Fi enabled area.

There is no scanning feature.

However, the video collection is a nice touch and we also like that you can checkout as a guest.

Last year's grade: C

Current grade: B

Walmart

Like Home Depot, Walmart recently updated its application.

In Walmart's case, it went from having only an electronics section to adding a full-scale store.

The application features a single product on the home screen, which is a nice way to spotlight particular items.

Hopefully, Walmart will not try selling this space any time soon.

Search is clearly important to Walmart and rightly so, with the functionality available at the top of the home screen as well as its own navigation item.

While there is a bestsellers section, Walmart does not include a shop icon to allow for full-scale browsing of all items in a category.

Not everyone shops the same way i.e. typing in keywords so retailers need to cater to a variety of shopping habits.

Even if browsing by category takes a few extra taps, many people are comfortable drilling down to a particular item.

The weakest feature of Walmart's application is the lack of in-application purchasing.

If you want to buy something, the application shuts down and the mobile browser launches Walmart's website. How very 2009.

Last year's grade: C

Current grade: B

Best Buy

As Best Buy loads, the screen shows a picture of an employee. That picture has not changed for quite awhile.

Would it not be fun if to show a different Best Buy employee every time the application is opened?

The home screen of Best Buy has changed since it was first reviewed.

The original version had each shopping category displayed as an icon, without any scrolling.

Now, it has turned those categories into a list, making the application no less functional, but more like many of the others out there.

Along with the ability to browse the departments, Best Buy also puts search, as well as special offers, front and center.

Perhaps the best feature is that you can search within a particular category.

For example, tap into the cameras and camcorders section and you will see that the search field at the top of the screen is dedicated to that particular category.

A bar code scan feature has also been added in a nice, unobtrusive manner.

The weakest part of the application is the store locator. There is no obvious way to change your location or enter in a ZIP code to see alternative store locations.

To change locations, you must go to the settings section, but this area is not very intuitive and a little buggy.

The experience once you tap into a particular store should also be revised. It is too easy to make an accidental phone call, plus the map listing is clunky.

Last year's grade: A

Current grade: A

Target

Bravo to Target for featuring sales and discounts right up front on the home screen. However, it only lists a few items in Daily Deals and there should be quadruple the amount.

The application has a bar code scanner, which is all the rage, but Target generally keeps the bells and whistles to a minimum.

There is no search feature on the home screen, but search does appear under the products section, which also allows for browsing by category.

There are no "buy" or "add to cart" buttons on the application, which is a big negative.

If you click on a product's price the application closes and you are taken to Target's Web site again very old-school.

It is also annoying that you cannot add a product to a shopping list without signing in first.

Unfortunately, even after you sign in, you must first create a list before you can add something to it. Too much work.

Once you have everything in order, unfortunately, the list feature is clunky and slow.

The Target logo on the top left of the screens is still a dead link after all this time. It should take users back to the home screen.

Overall, the application is not too different than it was a year ago.

Last year's grade: C+

Current grade: B

Amazon

Amazon had a really good application before and their product remains at the top of the list. Its thousands of retailers have been smoothly integrated into the mobile experience, just like on the Web site.

There is no shop-by-category section, but the smart search feature loads items while you are typing and nicely mimics the habits most people probably use when shopping on Amazon's Web site.

The scanning feature is smart enough to know when a bar code is in its sights, so there is no need to click a button to take a picture.

Amazon has also launched a separate Price Check application that is all about identifying products through bar codes, photos, even voice recognition.

"Deal of the Day," as well as timed "Lightning Deals" are accessible from the Gold Box section of the home screen.

It would be nice if Amazon allowed mobile users write reviews, but overall, whether you want to buy something new or used, Amazon is a great way to shop.

Last year's grade: A

Current grade: A

Sears

The Sears2Go and the Kmart application use the same template and are both published by Sears.

They also have the same product description in the App Store, so take your pick or download both.

For this review, we will focus on Sears.

The application includes a browse by category section on the home screen, which is good.

Perhaps the nicest touch is the Ask an Expert /Customer Service section.

This area not only provides online advice, but you can actually make a phone call to a particular department. No other retailer that we looked at bothered to include such a service.

Making a phone call might seem quaint, but using a mobile phone is still mobile marketing, and this help section is both a powerful and appreciated addition.

Sears also launched the Personal Shopper application that shows a continued commitment to customer service.

Like all retailers, the main Sears' application includes standard search functionality.

The next step is to make search smart enough to display results as you type, something that only Amazon is doing.

The store locator at Sears is good, except there is no way to get directions. This is worth including in a future update, even if the main application is forced to close.

Sears also lets you keep track of lists, but like Target, you must be signed in to add items.

Conversely, being logged in is not necessary to add an item to your shopping cart.

Overall, Sears has most of the features found in today's retailer applications, but to use the analogy of making pizza, adding all the ingredients cheese, sauce, bread does not automatically mean your result will be the best on the planet.

Current grade: B+

Toys R' Us

The Toys R' Us application has been live for awhile now, and the retailer has pretty much got it right from the start.

For example, the shopping and checkout is fully integrated within the application, and it has search, browse as well as a store locator, which are all easy to access.

The locator function just needs an update so you can put in any ZIP code.

Toys R' Us also allows for browsing by category, brand, new arrivals and top sellers, which helps narrow down what can normally be a tedious way to find what you want.

The retailer also allows for search within categories. However, this feature did not always prove useful or free of

bugs.

The registration and checkout process is easy and a good reason to shop from this application.

Other sections such as the wish list and baby registry need to be incorporated into the main mobile application, instead of sending you to the Web site. And the Frequently Asked Questions goes to a 404 Error.

Generally, Toys R' Us has provided a clean, easy way to shop. Now it is time to give the application a tune-up.

Not only to spruce up some of the screens, design and layout, but to improve functionality and usability across the board.

It does not necessarily mean Toys R' Us has to add a scanning feature to be like everyone else. It simply means that the company should take what it already has and bring it to the next level.

It should also be noted that of all the retailers reviewed, only Toys R' Us had a BlackBerry application, though based on the user reviews, it is time to update that platform as well.

Current grade: B

Macy's

The Macy's application is a bit buggy.

For example, the home screen does not always load properly, which is a rough way to start off a relationship with shoppers. It also crashed a few times during testing.

The application has most of the same features as other retailers. The search or shop sections keep the shopping experience within the application, as they should.

Macy's also has a refine search button, which is appreciated, though it could be much more useful.

For example, search for "shoes" and 2,500 items appear. Tap refine and you can narrow this by brand or price.

But what about narrowing by men, women, girls, boys or shoe size?

The shop section reminded us of the old Best Buy home screen, with the various categories listed in a way that keeps scrolling to a minimum.

Once inside a section, Macy's does a nice job of making the browsing experience easier than most retailers.

The store locator is hidden, but worked fine, though getting directions is a pain.

Macy's also includes an offers section, which is a static page that lists coupons and promotion codes.

Checkout is inside the application, which is a must for any quality retailer nowadays.

There are few other bells and whistles in the Macy's product, and I was actually appreciative that it has not yet jumped on the scanner bandwagon. Better to get those crashing bugs ironed out first.

Current grade: B

Retailer overview: Features at a glance

Company	Search	Browse by Category	In-App Checkout	Store Locator	Discounts				iPhone	Android	BlackBerry	Other Noteworthy Features
					Coupons	Bar Code Scanning	Sharing	or				
Home Depot	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	video, tool & calculator	
Wal-Mart	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	order tracking	
Best Buy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	search within a department	
Target	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	wedding & baby registry	
Amazon	Yes	No	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	recommendations	
SeorsR'Us	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	direct call help	
ToysRUs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	search within a category	
Ways	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	events listings	

Many retailers have made solid strides over the past year. And while many other brands have also launched in the mobile space, there are plenty of others yet to do so.

For example, there is still nothing in the iPhone App Store from Lowe's (due this month), RadioShack, Costco, BJ's Wholesale Club or Bloomingdale's.

Even those stores that have launched something are still in first-generation mode, with plenty of improvements that can be made.

It is also worth noting that none of the applications had in-store GPS to help shoppers find what they are looking for,

nor did we spot any integrations with Groupon or similar "check-in" services. A few of those are on the way, so we will know soon enough how they fare.

Go ahead and feel comfortable shopping from home. Thanks to the variety of mobile applications that have become available, you no longer need to jump in the car or even boot up the computer.

Please read last year's review:

[Rating retailers' iPhone apps: Amazon, Best Buy, Home Depot, Target, Walmart](#)

Al Kalman is president of [AlKal Media Group](#), New York and Washington. Reach him at al@alkalmedia.com.

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