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Business at its best

Why a mobile app does not make sense

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We are in the middle of a love fest with mobile applications. Every brand feels the need to develop one, believing this is its mobile panacea the easy route to be relevant, accessible and cool.

There is much to be said for today's mobile applications and their role in accelerating the mobile device as a marketing vehicle. We are already using them for mobile banking, booking flights and buying from Amazon.

But as a category, mobile applications have an inevitable shelf life because, quite frankly, they cause marketers to spend too much time and money with unpredictable returns.

The source of the problem is the fragmentation in the mobile market which presents mobile application designers, developers and marketers with enormous complexities for creating a consistent brand experience.

Rap on app
First, let us look at application definition and development.

As applications are designed for specific form factors, browsers and devices, it takes significant time and effort to ensure they are up-to-date with the ever-evolving marketplace.

In the case of iPhone applications originally designed for the EDGE network, portions were progressively rebuilt to eventually take advantage of the iOS 4.0 technology, accounting for a higher screen resolution and video capability.

When planning for Android applications, more than four screen resolutions and several screen densities must be taken into account.

This is in addition to responding to the already diverse user experience environments for example, the HTC Sense and Samsung's Touch Wiz.

Take another step back.

Consider the manpower effort to create a consistent experience across just both the iOS and Android platforms.

Throw in the complexity of two native code sets, unique user interfaces and the human factors linked to each platform. This all contributes to a significant user experience management dilemma.

Now take a look at how your application is intended to be discovered by your target users.

Fact is, the app store is your first barrier to entry. Apple's iTunes is littered with applications created by big-names to complement their offline and online brands.

Yet, it seems that many of these brands do not focus on marketing their mobile applications: it is as if they are banking on an "iOS osmosis" function that their users will inherently find their way to their mobile application without any calls-to-action or marketing campaigns.

And you cannot rely on search. Apple maintains a cryptic process within iTunes for its search methodology and all platform app stores are affected to various degrees by clutter.

Furthermore, once your application is live, user reviews over which you have no control also affect the application's popularity, positively or negatively.

And what if, once launched, your application has bugs? You worked hard to drive folks to your application, now you

must update the application. Can you be sure all your users will even download the updated version?

Web feat

The mobile Web, on the other hand, is intrinsically more searchable, discoverable, measurable and testable ultimately providing greater ROI for mobile initiatives with less effort and complexity.

The common code base makes transferring the efficiencies of the desktop experience to mobile platforms so much easier.

Also, take into consideration the advent of HTML5, which makes creating device-independent content strategies a reality.

Furthermore, mobile sites obfuscate the need to participate in app stores, removing the barrier to entry and discoverability issue.

Not all challenges are resolved by a mobile Web presence. There are still many factors beyond your control, many of which are environmental namely, carrier quality, strength of signal and even device battery state.

Let us not forget that the end user's expectation for mobile is an inherently immediate experience.

Couple this expectation with the fragmentation challenge.

A mobile Web strategy creates efficiencies, but now marketers responsible for ensuring a positive customer experience must attach themselves at the hip to those responsible for delivering a promptly available and fast user experience.

In the Web world, the relationship between marketing and IT is somewhat distant or tenuous. In the mobile world, it's an imperative.

So before you jump on the mobile application bandwagon, stop and think what your longevity plans are. Have you got sufficient resources and budgets in place, or is a mobile-optimized site a better strategy for the long-term?

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