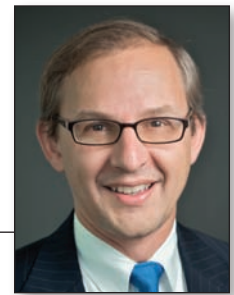


If We Build It, Will They Come?



By J. David Harvey

In the era of the iPhone, iPad and Android phones, mobile device use is exploding. In fact, Gartner predicts that mobile phones will surpass PCs as the most common way to access the internet by 2013. For legal marketers, that means new challenges to provide content that is easily accessible through these devices, and at a level of quality consistent with our website efforts. In addition, the advent of mobile applications (apps) has unleashed a torrent of creativity in the business-to-consumer space. Is there a role for apps in the professional services industry as well? I'd say the answer is a qualified "yes" and, as with most things marketing, depends upon the positioning and branding of your firm.

Walk Before You Run

Before you consider whether your firm needs an app, test the current user experience of your customers and/or prospects by accessing your website from a mobile device. Download your website from your mobile device. For example, if you're not able to read attorney bios from your device, then your user experience is already sub-optimal. A developer can create a "Mobi" version of your website; this is a mobile-friendly version of your site that appears on any hand-held mobile device that has a web browser. Typically, it is a stripped down version of your site, including the basics such as attorney bios, locations and news headlines.

Multiple Platforms to Consider

Now that you've determined that your website is optimized for mobile viewing, you can consider the advantages/disadvantages of producing an app. Complicating this decision is the fact that there are three main platforms/devices to consider: Apple's iPhone (apps will also run on iTouch and iPad devices), RIM's Blackberry, and Google's Android operating systems. Unfortunately, these systems are not compatible, so you will incur basically the same development costs for an app developed on each of the three platforms. With which app should you start? If any of the big three is already a client, then you have an easier decision to make, as you now have a client relations benefit to producing the app, in addition to the marketing and public relations benefits. If not, the decision is more difficult as each platform has its pros and cons.

The platform with the largest market share of corporate users is RIM's Blackberry and RIM is rapidly working on building up its app store. Still, to date, Blackberry app usage pales in comparison with Apple's App Store where there are more than 225,000 apps. Also, many corporate IT departments discourage or outright disable the ability to download apps on company-issued Blackberrys. Apple's appeal has been primarily to the consumer market, though business-related apps are now one of the fastest-growing categories. Google's Android platform, released just two years ago, is actually growing the fastest in terms of market share and represents 12 percent of the market. It may also have the most appeal for the hardcore geek crowd, though the iPhone still maintains the "cool" factor that has made it so popular and one of the fastest-selling products in modern times.

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Do We Really Need an App for That?

Some thought leaders argue that it is impossible to compete with the consumer choices already available. In fact, legal blogger Kevin O'Keefe argued earlier this year that firms should forget about building an app primarily for the following reasons: 1) Yours will never be found or widely used

continued on page 14



in the huge world of apps; and, 2) It would demonstrate a misunderstanding of how content is consumed, i.e., people do not want a separate app for every information source.

In my view, Kevin's arguments are important to consider but not a reason to dismiss developing an app out of hand. True, law firms are not going to develop Farmville-style apps that generate millions of downloads. Still, for existing and prospective clients, there is value in having another real touch point with your firm. At Morrison & Foerster, we launched our own app, MoFo2Go, in March and once our app is downloaded, a user is just two touches away from being able to call any of our 1,000 attorneys. Clients might spend downtime in an airport or on a subway train catching up on important legal developments through the news feed we include on our app. It is simply too early to write off this entire category and all too reminiscent of thought leaders dismissing blogs as something "attorneys will never do" a few short years ago. Our firm is known as one that "gets tech" and technologically savvy clients comprise a significant share of our client base. For us, it was important to be among the first out with an iPhone app. As Hellerman Baretz partner and co-founder, John Hellerman, has stated: It's about "living your brand." Would developing an app be in keeping with your firm's identity? That's an important question to consider.



Feature Set Considerations

If you decide an app makes sense for your firm, you need to consider what type of app to develop and the content to include. The simplest and least expensive is going to be a single function app. Arnold and Porter developed this type of iPhone app for their Consumer Law Blog. The main difference between this format and receiving the information via RSS feed or Mobi is simple convenience. Some have argued that the added convenience does not give mobile users reason enough to download a single function app.

Morrison & Foerster and Torsys are two firms that have developed multi-functional apps. Though they were developed independently, there is a lot of overlap in the feature set. Both include a full "people" and "news" section. Torsys incorporated its Twitter feed into the app. At MoFo, we decided to include a "game" function on the app because we felt that it was more in keeping with the experience of iPhone users—it's not a function found on our website. The point is to think about content or functions that will keep the user coming back for more. That might also include blogs, video or other content users would expect to view from their mobile device. Another option is to consider a piggyback approach. Content aggregators like JDSupra can jumpstart the app creation platform through co-branded apps.

For legal marketers, providing content that is geared to a mobile user is a new and, for many, daunting challenge. We have much to learn from those companies that have a consumer orientation, but need to tailor our offerings for our specific client base consistent with our firm's brand. If you have been concerned that your legal marketing position has not tapped your creativity enough, here is your chance. The world of apps requires all the creativity we, as legal marketers, can muster. ■



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