

PRWeek

Master Class: For brands seeking to make an impact, is creating an app always the best plan?

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Panel

Rishi Dave, Executive director of online marketing, Dell
rishi_dave@dell.com

Graham Gunn, SVP, digital creative director, MSLGroup
graham.gunn@mslgroup.com

Jared Hendler, EVP, global director of digital and creative services, MWW Group
jhendler@mww.com

Scott Monty, Global digital communications manager, Ford
smonty@ford.com

Viveka von Rosen, Director of social media training, Hellerman Baretz Communications
vvonrosen@hellermanbaretz.com



Rishi Dave, executive director of online marketing, Dell:

Would you rather read about Paris online or would you prefer to visit the city? The physical experience clearly wins over the virtual one, but the time and money required make it difficult to go. As such, the virtual experience may be the only option. It's certainly better than nothing. For example, it's great to see the paintings from the Louvre online in high definition.

When it comes to mobile apps, people have already committed their scarce time and money to the physical experience first. So unless an app enhances the actual experience, it will struggle to stand out as a "must-have."

So having established the importance of enhancing real-life experiences, apps need to do this in two ways:

First, they have to make boring experiences fun, such as playing *Angry Birds* during a lackluster meeting or while waiting for a flight.

Second, they should make experiences more efficient. For example, TripIt or Google Maps make traveling more efficient, while Facebook makes it easy to communicate current experiences to friends.

Many apps don't achieve these two objectives and are unnecessary. Purchasing an expensive item through a phone may be interesting, but it does not enhance a physical experience and is not really necessary.

Amazon gets this. It could have easily allowed people to purchase their offerings through apps. However, this does not necessarily fall into the guidelines above and does not benefit any physical experience. Instead, the company looks

to give consumers the ability to barcode scan an item and instantly learn its cost on the site. That makes the store-buying experience more efficient.



Graham Gunn, SVP, digital creative director, MSLGroup:

Today's strategy sessions seem incomplete without loud and lengthy debates around connecting clients and audiences through mobile and tablet apps - whether to create a word-of-mouth-worthy brand experience, tap into the power of social commerce, or open up new revenue streams.

Apps are the must-have items of the season, but do brands really need them? Words such as "widgets" and "aggregators" are rarely heard any more. Are apps just another digital bandwagon? Well, yes and no, respectively.

Done well, apps make it possible for an immersive customer experience in a coherent brand environment. If we give customers reason to download through strategic insight, careful planning, and an understanding of what they want, we're essentially setting up a branch office on their smartphone.

I'm not talking about re-skinned editions of *Tetris* or *Pong*. I'm talking about apps that make customers' lives more efficient, more informed, more enjoyable, and keep them coming back for more.

Smartphone and tablet use is increasing exponentially. Mobile is aiming to surpass desktop for Web access by 2014. What this means is that in order to continue engaging with consumers on the Web, a brand experience via mobile needs to be part of the marketing mix. Brand sites are rarely architected for mobile consumption and social media content needs to sacrifice robust brand narrative for brevity and targeting. Fortunately, we can build an app for that.



Jared Hendler, EVP, global director of digital and creative services, MWW Group:

Everything depends on the strategy. When advising clients of whether or not they should develop an app, there are three questions we always ask:

- Will creating an app help achieve your business goals? The purpose of the app should always ladder back to the communications strategy and support your overall business objectives.
- Will an app add value to your brand while meeting the consumer's need? Apps shouldn't be just another advertisement. They need to bring utility or inspire through content, while also communicating the values of the brand. When balancing brand message against the needs of your consumer, the app should weigh heavily toward the consumer need.

Do you have the technical capacity, time, and resources to maintain the app? Building an app requires you to support multiple mobile platforms, which can get expensive. In order for the app to rank well within app stores, it needs to be frequently updated and improved to meet consumer expectations, which requires an ongoing commitment.

Building a mobile browser version of your app rather than an actual app that sits on the mobile device can cut costs. Either way, if you can't be fully committed and invested in maintaining the app, it's probably not for you.

There will always be the temptation to embrace the hottest technology. However, if such an innovative offering doesn't help meet a business objective, add value to your brand or the consumer, or if you simply don't have the proper time or the resources to do it right, then you don't really need an app.



Scott Monty, global digital communications manager, Ford:

New devices and operating systems generate a wave of new apps. Looking at the iPhone and iPad alone, there are now more than 500,000 and 100,000 apps, respectively. What are they all being used for?

A recent *eMarketer* article found that 95% of people who download apps regularly use between one and nine apps and only 37% regularly use between 10 and 20. So it's clear that app overload is quickly becoming the case.

If it sounds like we've been here before, you might be correct. Think about the proliferation of microsites - purpose-built sites that serve a specific campaign or initiative because the corporate site is too inflexible or general. Or ponder the rise of multiple Facebook pages and Twitter accounts that support campaigns rather than the longer-term commitment that social media requires. In many cases, brands and companies use these tactics simply "because we can."

There's a prevailing sentiment that we might be headed in the same direction with apps. While the majority of people use apps for the news, social networking, and gaming, many brands create apps because it seems like the latest shiny object. The fact is, many brands are not focusing on the need to provide a superior mobile Web experience and are instead jumping to app development.

At Ford, we believe in providing value in our social media and mobile experiences: if you're taking time out of your busy life to spend it with us, we want to be sure we are giving you a worthwhile experience. Our Mustang Customizer not only works on the mobile Web, but we've also developed an app for it, largely because we want people to have fun with it - both online and off.

Is an app necessary for this? No, but our Mustang fans deserve it.



Viveka von Rosen, director of social media training, Hellerman Baretz Communications:

I dropped my iPhone today, shattering the screen and rendering it unusable. Fortunately, I had my old Treo at home. Within a few minutes, I switched out my SIM card and was ready to go. Or so I thought. The Treo had no apps and, apparently, I am an app addict.

So are apps really necessary? Yes.

I need my Dragon app for hands-free texting. I need my LinkedIn app to keep up with my invitations, messages, and discussions. I need my Twitter app to answer direct messages and to post last-minute events I forgot to mention. I need my Foursquare app so the world can track my progress. I need my music on the road. I need my MapQuest app for my business trips to unfamiliar places. I need my Bump, my Maps, and my Notes. I need my Weather Channel app. I need my email. I need all of these apps. Apparently, though, I don't need my phone nearly as much as I need the Skype app.

We live in a mobile world. We work all the time and rely on our smartphones to maintain unfettered productivity. Was being app-free good for me? Perhaps. I found myself breathing and smelling the roses. However, I also found myself anxious to get back to my computer or iPad. Smelling the roses - is there an app for that?

Whether you are an attorney, schoolteacher, or tai chi instructor, apps have made our world more productive. They have also allowed us to achieve an unprecedented level of interconnectedness. Apps give us access to and let us share information. They allow us to connect. They help us build reputations, relationships, and brands. They even help us relax.

The Takeaway

- Apps must ensure productivity and enjoyment. They need to make people's lives more efficient and be fun enough to ensure their continued use.
- Apps must not appear to be just another ad. They need to inspire through content, while also communicating the brand's message and values.
- In the race to develop apps, brands must keep in mind the importance of offering their consumers a superior mobile Web experience.